

BEKBEKA / BOOK 01

Zeth Mnguni - Genesis

Chapters 1-8 live edition



Novel chapters with a lighter rotating Panel Door preview after each chapter.

Kool Geek Creative Arts

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Chapter 1: The Grass Mat

Before the yard, there was sunlight.

Zeth remembered it in pieces, never as a whole thing.

His mother's laugh first. Warm, sudden, filling rooms before she entered them. Then his father's hand over his, guiding a small screwdriver into the back of a toy radio Zeth had already broken twice. A house with polished floors. A swimming pool he was not allowed to run around. The smell of his father's shirts when Menzi Mnguni lifted him from the couch and carried him half-asleep past adult voices.

In those memories, everyone still had time.

Then the light changed.

Camera flashes. A gate closing. His father on television, but not the way fathers were supposed to be on television. Menzi's face looked too still under the headline. Diego Duma's voice came from somewhere behind glass, smooth one moment and sharp the next. Zeth remembered his father's hand striking a desk, not hard enough to break it, but hard enough to make the little boy in the hallway stop breathing.

Then his mother crying without sound.

Then men at the house.

Then a woman's hand pulling him back from a doorway.

Then nothing kind.

The nothing became whistles.

Academy mornings. Grey tracksuits. Cold water on his face before sunrise. Beds folded tight enough for inspection. Shoes in a line. Boys who learned not to cry because crying made the instructors patient, and patient

instructors were worse than angry ones. A bell at five. Running before breakfast. Coding after homework. Fighting drills in a hall that smelled of floor polish and old sweat.

"Again, Mnguni."

He remembered falling.

"Again."

He remembered getting up.

"Again."

Zeth opened his eyes.

The sky above him was white-blue and too wide. A fly worried the air near his ear. Somewhere beyond the wall a taxi hooted twice, a sharp township complaint that needed no translation. He was lying on a grass mat in KB's front yard with his phone held above his face, the appointment email glowing like it had personally come to collect him.

Apex Sentinel Systems Internship Appointment

He had read the subject line so many times it had stopped looking like English.

The yard around him looked like three lives had crashed into one another and decided to stay. The house was one of the older Soweto houses, the bigger apartheid-era kind with thick walls, a low front fence, and rooms added over time by people who did not wait for permission to need space. It was not pretty, but it stood with a stubborn chest-out dignity, like an old woman at a funeral refusing to sit.

The front yard was half home, half workshop. A strip of tired grass survived near the washing line. The rest was hard-packed earth, oil stains, bricks, a cracked basin full of bolts, and two tyres leaning against the wall like they were also waiting for work. Delivery bikes crouched near the side gate. One

had its seat off. Another wore a taped-up mirror. A spanner lay in the dust beside a child's plastic sandal.

And behind all of it, clean enough to look rude, sat the white Polo Vivo.

Freshly washed. Bonnet still not perfectly aligned. New wipers. Polished headlights. Tyres blacked. The car looked like it had been pulled from a better neighbourhood and forced to learn humility overnight.

Zeth lowered the phone.

KB came around the Polo with an open quart in one hand and a rag in the other. His T-shirt was dark with sweat down the chest. Grease lived under his nails. He had the walk of a man who had been busy since morning and had already decided to call that a personality.

He pushed the bottle toward Zeth's face.

"My man, they'll rescind their offer if you keep staring at that email like it owes you damages."

Zeth turned his head away. "It's not even twelve."

"That is why I'm not saying drink. I'm saying smell success."

"Success smells like warm beer?"

"In Soweto? Sometimes." KB wiped his hands on the rag, then reached into his pocket and threw the keys at him. "Ayi, isilungile, ntwana."

Zeth caught them against his chest.

For a second he did not move.

KB dropped onto the grass beside him, not lying on the mat but close enough to claim it. He stretched out with a groan, bottle resting on his stomach, eyes closed like a man who had just completed open-heart surgery instead of arguing with a starter motor.

"Don't make that face," KB said.

"What face?"

"That face you make when somebody loves you and you start calculating tax."

Zeth sat up. The Polo keys were warm in his palm. The plastic tag was still on them, a cheap blue thing with ZETH written in black marker. Behind the car, one of KB's drivers was rinsing mud off a silver Corolla. A delivery rider sat on an upside-down crate, eating kota with both hands and watching them like this was better than television.

"I get your insistence in paying my rent as the MD," Zeth said, turning the keys over, "but I haven't contributed much since that thirty grand I gave you four years ago. Now this car as well. I feel like I'm taking too much from the business."

KB opened one eye.

"The MD?"

"That's what you call yourself."

"Because I am."

"Of a business whose office is your gogo's yard."

"Apple started in a garage."

"You don't own a garage."

"That's why we are better. We started outside."

Zeth tried not to smile and failed.

KB sat up, serious now, or at least serious enough for KB. "Listen here. There is no this business without you."

"There is."

"There isn't."

"You built it."

"With what? Hopes? Prayer? My good looks?" KB pointed the quart at him.

"That skorokoro came because you saved your bursary money like a madman. Everybody else at res was buying sneakers and dating girls with expensive hair. You came here December with thirty thousand rand and a face like you were committing fraud."

"It was not thirty. It was twenty-eight and change."

"You see? Witchcraft. Who remembers change from four years ago?"

"People who don't have money."

KB laughed once, then shook his head. "You gave me a start, Z. When I had nothing. You believed before there was something to believe in. So don't come here with this thing of 'I haven't contributed'. Awukho uChristmas ngaphandle kwe-Ultra Mel. You understand?"

Zeth stared at him.

"Did you just compare me to custard?"

"The important custard. The one that makes poor December look middle class."

The delivery rider on the crate choked on his kota.

Zeth looked away before the smile became something softer. KB saw too much when he wanted to. He had always seen too much. In high school, when the academy locked boys into silence and called it discipline, KB had been the first person outside those gates who looked at Zeth and said, "You're hungry," instead of "You're strong."

Gogo had fed him before asking his surname.

That had been the beginning of family.

A voice floated over the fence from the street.

"Awu, Zeth. Wena ngeke uhambe ungavalelisanga?"

Zeth closed his eyes.

KB's grin arrived before Zeth opened them.

Thobile Mathonsi stood on the pavement beyond the short fence, one hand on her hip, the other holding a plastic bag from the spaza. Everybody called her Thobi when they wanted sweetness and Mathobi when they wanted to start nonsense. She was three years older than Zeth and had the calm danger of a woman who knew exactly when men were lying, especially when the man was Zeth.

Her hair was tied up in a scarf. Gold hoops caught the sun when she tilted her head. She was not dressed for anyone, which somehow made it worse.

Zeth lifted himself onto one elbow.

"Lutho, sthandwa sami. Ngisendleleni nje. Ungibona ngilinde lesi dakwa silale so he won't cry when I leave."

KB stood so quickly beer sloshed over his fingers.

"Mathobi, Thoby, iyahamba lenyoni yakho," he called, stepping over Zeth's legs. "Uzosala nami."

Zeth grabbed for the bottle before it spilled on the mat. KB slapped his hand away, then used the same hand to push Zeth's shoulder.

"Don't listen to this one," KB told her. "He has been emotional the whole day. Even the car started crying."

Thobile leaned her forearms on the fence. "The car is too clean for him."

"Thank you," KB said. "I told him."

Zeth stood and dusted grass from the back of his jeans. "You both done?"

"Never," Thobile said.

There had been a time when he would have walked straight to the fence and tried to turn her teasing into a promise. Eighteen, still in matric, already too serious for his own face. Thobile had been the first woman to make him feel seen as a man and young as a boy in the same breath. He had mistaken that for forever with the confidence only a wounded teenager could have.

He had once bought a toy ring from a street vendor and presented it to her behind the spaza after two ciders.

She had laughed so hard she cried, then kissed his forehead and told him to go pass mathematics.

At the time, it had felt like cruelty.

Later he understood it was mercy. Thobile had a child already. A life already. Wounds already. She had told him once, drunk and honest in the back seat of the first skorokoro, that she was not going to be the woman who took a boy with a future and made him small.

Zeth had argued.

Zeth had argued for years.

Eventually he stopped arguing and accepted the smaller thing she allowed: friendship, heat when both of them were lonely, laughter over walls, and the strange tenderness of people who never became what they almost were.

"So you are really leaving us for town?" Thobile asked.

"Maboneng is not overseas."

"For people with rent, it is overseas."

KB nodded. "This one has parking underground now. Next week he'll speak through the nose."

"I already speak through the nose," Zeth said.

"No, you speak like a scholarship." KB pointed at him. "Different disease."

Thobile laughed. Zeth let the sound land where it wanted.

Across the street, a man in blue overalls shouted at a teenager for leaning on his gate. Somewhere a woman complained that KB's boys had left oil water running toward her side. KB turned his head and shouted back that the oil was older than her marriage and she must not start. The delivery rider abandoned his kota to move a bike before the argument became evidence.

Then a small boy kicked a ball under the Polo.

Everybody froze.

KB turned slowly.

"Whose child is this?"

The boy pointed down the road and prepared to deny his own name.

Zeth crouched, reached under the car, and rolled the ball back. "Next time aim for the Corolla."

"Why the Corolla?" the driver asked.

"It has suffered before."

"This is why we don't miss you," KB said, but he was smiling.

The neighbourhood rearranged itself around the moment. The woman at the gate kept complaining but softer. The boy ran. The rider moved the bike. Thobile checked something in her plastic bag and looked at Zeth again.

"Come say bye properly later," she said.

KB made a wounded noise. "Properly?"

"Not you."

"I am also leaving emotionally."

"You are going nowhere, Kabelo."

"Exactly. That is why I need comfort."

Thobile rolled her eyes and began walking. After three steps she looked back at Zeth. "Don't let them make you boring there."

The words caught him off guard.

"I'm already boring."

"No," she said. "You are just scared people will notice you're not."

Then she was gone, plastic bag swinging against her thigh.

KB watched Zeth watching her.

"Ayi," he said softly. "That one will make you write poetry and lose weight."

"Shut up."

"You see? Already defensive. Poetry loading."

Zeth threw the rag at him.

Inside the house, Gogo's room was dim and smelled of camphor cream, sunlight on blankets, and the tea she never finished while it was hot. The television played low in the corner with the volume nearly off. A newsreader moved her mouth above captions about politics, secrecy, and some minister denying something with the confidence of a person who had practised in a mirror.

Gogo lay propped against pillows, smaller than Zeth wanted her to be. Her eyes, though, were still sharp enough to search him.

"Udlile?" she asked.

Zeth smiled. "Yebo, Gogo."

"Liar."

KB, behind him, clicked his tongue. "Hayi, Zethi Selebi. 'My hands are clean,' stomach empty, face guilty. This is why you're a hacker, ntwana. In real life you can't lie."

Gogo ignored him. "Come here."

Zeth went to the side of the bed and bent down. Her hand came up slowly to his cheek. It was dry and warm. For a moment he was not twenty-one. He was fourteen, standing in this same room with academy bruises hidden under his shirt, pretending he had only come because KB was forcing him to watch a movie.

Gogo had looked at him once and known.

Not everything. Just enough.

"You will call," she said.

"I will."

"Not when you need something. Just call."

"I promise."

"And eat."

"I promise."

"And don't fight at work."

KB laughed. "Hawu, Gogo, it's an office."

She looked past Zeth. "A fool with a swivel chair is still a fool. He just hurts you with paperwork."

KB lifted both hands. "Yoh. HR is not ready for you."

Gogo's thumb moved once across Zeth's cheek. "Your mother would be proud."

The room went quiet in a way that had weight.

Zeth swallowed. "You think?"

Gogo's eyes softened, but not with pity. She had never given him pity. Pity was for strangers and funerals. Gogo gave instruction.

"I know."

He hugged her carefully because her bones felt too close to the surface now. She held him with surprising strength for three breaths, maybe four. Then she tapped his back.

"Go. Before this one cries outside and blames dust."

KB made a sound from the doorway. "My sinuses are private."

Outside, the sun had shifted. The Polo looked even whiter, the yard even dirtier around it. Zeth put his bags in the boot: laptop, clothes, two pairs of shoes, a small box of documents, and the few personal things he did not trust anyone else to move.

KB walked around the car again, checking things he had already checked.

"Oil is fine. Water is fine. Tyres are fine. If it makes that sound when you turn left, ignore it."

"What sound?"

"Exactly."

"KB."

"It's character. All cars need character."

Zeth closed the boot. For a moment neither of them joked.

KB held out his hand. Zeth took it. The handshake became a pull, then a hug, hard and long. KB smelled of grease, beer, sun, and home.

"Don't go there and become small," KB said into his shoulder.

"I'm going for an internship, not prison."

"Same thing if you let rich people talk too much."

Zeth laughed against him.

KB pulled back first and slapped his chest. "I'll come check you next Saturday. Bottle of gin. Not that expensive one you pretend to like. Real gin."

"There is no real gin in a plastic bottle."

"There is if real men are drinking it."

"You are going to embarrass me in my new building."

"That's the point. People must know you have relatives."

Zeth looked at the house, the yard, the bikes, the driver rinsing the Corolla again for no reason, the delivery rider licking sauce off his thumb, the window behind which Gogo was probably pretending not to watch him leave.

He had been taken from a house once.

This time he was leaving one by choice.

It felt worse in a way he did not know how to explain.

He got into the Polo. The seat was too clean. The steering wheel still had that second-hand shine from whatever KB had wiped it with. When he turned the key, the engine caught after one uncertain cough.

KB pointed at the bonnet. "Character."

Zeth shook his head and reversed slowly out of the yard.

At the gate he stopped.

KB lifted the quart in salute.

Zeth lifted the keys, realised that made no sense because he was driving, and lifted his hand instead.

Then he went.

Soweto moved around him in late-afternoon layers: boys with school-holiday dust on their legs, women carrying plastic chairs, men under car bonnets, music from somewhere unseen, smoke from meat, sunlight caught in satellite dishes. At a stop street, he saw a father balancing a toddler on his hip while arguing with a mechanic. The image struck too close to something old. For half a second the mechanic's blue overalls became his father's white shirt. The toddler's hand became his own.

Then a taxi hooted behind him and the memory broke.

"Sharp, sharp," Zeth muttered, and drove.

By the time he reached Maboneng, the city had changed its accent. Buildings stood closer together. Art on walls. People on pavements with bags, phones, cigarettes, plans. Security guards at entrances. Restaurants pretending not to be expensive. The kind of young people who looked like they had chosen themselves carefully before leaving the house.

His apartment building's basement smelled of concrete, damp, and car exhaust. The Polo's headlights slid over painted numbers until he found his parking bay. He sat there after switching off the engine, listening to it tick itself quiet.

For the first time all day, no one was talking.

His phone lit up.

KB: Don't scratch my car.

Another message followed.

KB: Your car.

Another.

KB: But don't scratch it.

Zeth smiled in the dark.

In the lift, a woman with red braids and a laundry basket looked at him, then at the bags by his feet, then back at him.

"Moving in?"

"Trying."

"This building tests people."

"I test well."

She smiled. "We'll see."

On the next floor, two women got in laughing, smelling of perfume and outside. One looked him up and down without shame. The other looked at the Polo keys in his hand.

"New neighbour?"

"Depends who is asking."

"Someone who knows which washing machines steal coins."

"Then definitely new," Zeth said. "I still trust machines."

"Shame."

"Pray for me."

"We don't pray for handsome men in this building. It makes them worse."

That made them laugh. The red-braided woman hid her smile in the laundry basket. Zeth looked at the lift numbers and tried not to look as pleased as he felt.

His apartment was small enough that the door nearly introduced you to the whole place at once. Kitchenette to the left. Bathroom straight ahead. Living room with a two-seater couch that KB had called "executive" because one leg had been fixed with a brick. A mattress leaned against the wall, still wrapped in plastic. Boxes waited with the patience of unpaid accounts.

Zeth dropped his bags.

He meant to unpack.

He meant to shower.

He meant to iron his shirt for the morning, check the route to Apex again, charge his laptop, call Gogo like he had promised, and maybe message Thobile something clever enough to prove he was not thinking about her.

Instead he sat on the two-seater couch.

Then he leaned back.

Then the room shifted sideways and sleep took him without asking.

His phone slid from his hand onto his chest, screen still open to the appointment email.

Outside, Maboneng kept moving.

Inside, Zeth slept under the glow of the future, too tired to see the past moving toward him.

Panel Door Preview: The Grass Mat

A rotating selection of 3 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 1.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

A collage of scenes from the movie 'Boyz n the Hood'. The central panel shows Laurence Fishburne as Laurence Fishburne looking intensely at the camera. To his left, Cuba Gooding Jr. as Laurence Fishburne is shown in a scene with Cuba Gooding Jr. To his right, Laurence Fishburne is shown in a scene with Laurence Fishburne. Below the central panel, Cuba Gooding Jr. is shown in a scene with Cuba Gooding Jr. To the left of the central panel, Cuba Gooding Jr. is shown in a scene with Cuba Gooding Jr. To the right of the central panel, Cuba Gooding Jr. is shown in a scene with Cuba Gooding Jr. The collage is set against a background of a city street at night.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #ZethMnguni #Genesis #Menzi #Ayanda #Diego #SouthAfricanComics

Page 06 - The business started outside



Every empire begins somewhere ordinary: a yard, a joke, two boys refusing to stay small. The gate remembers who dreamed aloud first.

**#Bekbeka #Zeths #StartedOutside #TheGrassMat #Friendship #SouthAfricanComics
#AfricanStories**

Page 07 - Thobile at the fence



A fence can hold a whole history if both sides pretend not to look. Her voice finds the crack where memory keeps breathing.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #Thobile #TheGrassMat #Soweto #ComicBookPage #IndieComics

Chapter 2: 3 January

Zeth woke before the alarm.

For one confused second he did not know which ceiling had found him.

It was too low to be the academy dormitory. Too cracked to be the house from before. Too quiet to be KB's place, where even sleep had to make space for taxis, neighbours, bottles, engines, and somebody shouting somebody else's business over a wall.

This ceiling was his.

That made it worse.

The phone on his chest glowed in the dim room, still open to the appointment email. Sometime in the night his hand had closed around it like proof. The battery sat at fourteen percent. His neck had gone stiff from the two-seater couch, and one of his legs had slipped off the edge so that his socked foot rested on a cardboard box marked SHIRTS / DOCUMENTS / RANDOM in KB's handwriting.

The alarm was set for five.

The time was 04:37.

Zeth stared at the numbers until they stopped being numbers and became accusation.

Academy body, he thought.

That was what Thabo used to call it after training, when Zeth would arrive at the dojo before the lights were on and pretend he had come early because the taxis were unreliable.

Academy body.

It woke before whistles. It ate before hunger. It stood before orders. It learned the hour by pressure in the bones. Nobody had told Zeth to open his eyes, but somewhere inside him a bell still believed it owned the morning.

He sat up slowly.

The apartment was not unpacked enough to be messy with personality. It was messy with arrival. Boxes leaned against the wall in small defeated towers. His mattress, still wrapped in plastic, stood upright like an embarrassed guest. A black suit bag hung from the handle of the built-in cupboard. The kitchenette counter held a loaf of bread, a tin of instant coffee, two mugs from a supermarket sale, and a packet of noodles he had bought because independence apparently came in chicken flavour.

The two-seater couch had given up under him during the night. Its right side sagged lower than the left, the brick under the front leg doing the work of furniture and engineering at once. A thin brown throw, which he did not remember pulling over himself, lay twisted around his waist.

For a moment Zeth considered leaving it like that.

No one was watching.

No instructor would walk in with a clipboard. No older boy would laugh if the fold was soft. No whistle would split the room because a corner sat loose.

He stood, folded the throw anyway, and placed it squarely over the back of the couch.

Then he straightened the couch cushion.

Then the brick.

Then the box his foot had knocked.

He lined his shoes beside the wall, toes facing out, heels touching the skirting.

Only when the room looked less like a man had lost consciousness inside it did he breathe properly.

"Sharp," he said to no one.

His voice sounded too loud.

He picked up the phone and read the email again.

Apex Sentinel Systems Internship Appointment

Dear Mr Mnguni,

He hated the way that line still worked on him.

Mr Mnguni sounded like somebody with a bank balance, a father somewhere, and a mother who called to remind him to iron properly. It sounded like a person who belonged to a surname without flinching. In the academy they had used surnames like inventory. Mnguni, move. Mnguni, again. Mnguni, report. Mnguni, explain.

Dear Mr Mnguni sounded different.

It sounded chosen.

He scrolled through the letter: reporting time, reception instructions, identity document, temporary access registration, orientation room, dress code. The email said casual, but Zeth did not trust casual from institutions. Casual was how people with the right parents dressed down and still looked correct. Everyone else guessed, and guessing was where punishment liked to hide.

He had read all of it before. He had memorised it. He could have rebuilt the email from memory and still he checked, because checking was the only kind of prayer he trusted.

The phone buzzed once in his hand.

KB: If you wake up late on your first day I am repossessing my belief in you.

Zeth looked at the timestamp.

04:39.

He typed back.

Why are you awake?

The response arrived before he could put the phone down.

KB: Business never sleeps.

Another bubble.

KB: Also your gogo's bladder has unionised.

Then:

KB: Your gogo says eat.

Zeth sat on the edge of the couch and stared at that one for longer than the others. Your gogo. KB always wrote it like that when he wanted the words to enter the room and sit with Zeth. Not my gogo. Not Gogo. Your gogo.

Zeth typed:

Tell her I will.

He did not type that he had no appetite. He did not type that the apartment felt strange in the dark. He did not type that for a second after waking he had wanted the old yard, the oil stains, the shouting, even KB's warm beer pushed under his nose like a bad joke dressed as love.

KB would see too much through the omissions anyway.

KB: Liar.

Zeth smiled despite himself.

The bathroom mirror was too small and hung slightly crooked. It cut him at the shoulders, which was maybe a mercy. His hair had flattened on one

side. A crease from the couch ran across his cheek. He looked young in the parts of his face that still belonged to sleep, and too old around the eyes.

Cold water fixed what it could.

The shower coughed before producing heat. Zeth stood under it with both hands against the tiles and let the water drum on the back of his neck. Today had been waiting for him for years. It had been waiting in exam halls, bursary offices, academy dormitories, dojo floors, computer labs with broken chairs, and KB's yard while they counted money under a bare bulb and pretended the first skorokoro was a fleet.

Apex Sentinel Systems.

Software engineering track.

Duma Genesis Technologies.

Those names should have made him feel tall.

Instead, underneath the excitement, there was a thin wire of fear pulled tight enough to sing.

He turned the water colder for the last thirty seconds because old habits enjoyed surviving without permission.

The shirt had been ironed two days earlier at KB's house under Gogo's supervision, which meant it had been ironed like it owed her money. Zeth took it from the suit bag and shook it once. White. Plain. Better than anything the academy had issued but still cheap enough that the collar had its own anxiety.

He buttoned it slowly.

The tie took three attempts.

Not because he could not tie one. Zeth could strip and rebuild a laptop fan with a pocket screwdriver, break a man's wrist if given no better option, and

write code through a fever. A tie was not difficult.

This tie, today, had opinions.

The first knot sat fat and stupid. The second leaned left. The third was acceptable if nobody looked closely, which meant Zeth untied it and started again.

"Control your inputs," he muttered.

On the fourth attempt, the knot sat clean against the collar.

The jacket was not new. Nothing important in Zeth's life had ever been new the first time he needed it. KB knew a man who knew a cousin whose boss had lost weight and sold three suits for cash. The sleeves were nearly right. The shoulders were close enough. In the mirror, with his jaw tight and his hands smoothing the lapels, Zeth almost looked like the version of himself the email had addressed.

Dear Mr Mnguni.

He held the look for three seconds.

Then he looked away.

The small box of documents sat on the kitchenette counter where he had left it after failing to unpack. Identity document. Certified copies. Bank letter. Academic records. Appointment printout. A plastic sleeve with certificates from the academy, each one too clean, each one carrying the Duma Foundation crest like a stamp of ownership.

Underneath them, wrapped in tissue and tied with old thread, was the bracelet.

Zeth knew it was there before he opened the box.

He opened it anyway.

The bracelet was made of small blue and white beads, frayed at one end where the string had begun to lose its argument. It was too small for his wrist now. Maybe it had always been too small. He did not know whether it had belonged to his mother or whether she had bought it for him from somewhere and he had turned the memory into something softer. Childhood had holes. The mind filled holes with whatever let it keep walking.

But he remembered Ayanda's fingers tying it around him.

He remembered her laughing because he kept asking if it made him faster.

He remembered her saying, "Only if you run toward good things."

The memory came so suddenly that his chest tightened.

Zeth folded the tissue over the bracelet and put the certificates back on top.

Not today.

Today needed edges.

He made coffee too strong and toast too dry. He ate standing by the counter because sitting down felt like a negotiation with nerves. Halfway through the second slice, he caught himself calculating the drive: Maboneng to the Apex offices, early traffic, possible roadworks, parking, security processing, reception delay, human incompetence allowance.

The appointment letter said arrive by 07:45.

Zeth planned to be outside by 07:00.

Early was not eagerness if you stood properly.

At 05:51, the phone buzzed again.

Thobile: Don't become boring today.

No greeting. No explanation. Just the instruction.

Zeth read it twice.

He typed: Too late.

She replied with a laughing face made from punctuation and one word.

Liar.

Everybody had chosen the same insult this morning. Maybe that was family too.

The city outside his window had begun to colour itself in. Maboneng before sunrise was all edges: security lights, wet pavement, locked doors, a bakery smell from somewhere already working, a bottle rolling lazily in the gutter as if returning home from a better night than his. A man in a security jacket smoked beside the entrance across the road. Two women in heels walked quickly, laughing too loudly for the hour. A taxi slowed, collected a man who appeared from a doorway, then shot away before the door was fully closed.

Johannesburg did not wake.

It changed shifts.

Zeth took his laptop bag, the document folder, and the Polo keys. At the door he paused, looked back at the room, and felt the strange fear that if he left it now it might stop belonging to him.

Then he locked up twice and checked the handle once.

The basement was colder than the apartment. The Polo waited under fluorescent light, clean white body holding thin green reflections from the painted pillars. For a second Zeth saw it in KB's yard again, impossible and shining among oil stains. He walked around it because KB would somehow know if he did not. Tyres. Bonnet. Wipers. No scratches.

He got in.

The car started after the same uncertain cough.

"Character," Zeth said.

The parking gate lifted with a slow electric groan. He eased into the morning.

At that hour the city still had gaps in it. Maboneng gave him brick walls, painted signs, security gates, delivery vans, and men carrying crates with the grim patience of people who had never been impressed by sunrise. The Polo moved carefully through them, too clean for some streets and not clean enough for others. Zeth kept both hands on the wheel.

The radio found static first, then gospel, then a morning host laughing with the aggression of someone paid to be awake. Zeth turned the volume low. News came between adverts for furniture, insurance, and a sale that sounded like a threat.

The State Records Protection Bill was mentioned in the same voice people used for weather and crime: expected, serious, already exhausting. Civil society groups were planning more statements. Government spokespeople denied the Bill was meant to hide corruption. A minister said responsible citizens had nothing to fear from responsible classification.

Zeth stopped at a red light behind a taxi whose back window carried the words NO FEAR JUST GEAR in peeling letters.

"Responsible citizens," he said.

The taxi rolled back slightly before the light changed. Zeth gave it space. KB's voice entered his head without asking.

Don't scratch my car.

Your car.

But don't scratch it.

The city sharpened as he drove north. The buildings changed their posture. Glass appeared. Then more glass. Pavements widened and grew serious. Men in pressed shirts walked as if late for money. Women in heels crossed

roads without asking for permission from cars. Security booms multiplied. Even the trees looked employed.

At a big intersection, traffic held him long enough for the billboard to change.

First a bank.

Then a luxury apartment development.

Then Diego Duma.

His face filled the morning above the road, smiling down with the calm of a man who had never had to explain himself at a gate. Grey suit. White shirt. No tie. A look built from warmth, discipline, and expensive dentistry. Under him, in clean blue letters:

DUMA GENESIS TECHNOLOGIES

Securing Africa's Information Future

Zeth's stomach tightened.

It happened before thought. Before envy. Before ambition. A small internal closing, like a hand over a door.

He looked away, then looked back.

Diego Duma was everywhere if you paid attention. Business magazines. Tech conferences. Newspaper columns about innovation. Interviews about young Africans building the continent's future. Zeth knew the name the way everyone knew it, with the shallow familiarity of public faces.

But the smile on the billboard touched something old.

Not a memory exactly.

A temperature.

A room behind glass.

His father's voice, low and dangerous.

Another voice answering smoothly enough to make the anger look unreasonable.

The taxi behind him hooted.

The light had changed.

Zeth pressed the accelerator too hard, corrected, and moved with the traffic.

"Nerves," he said.

The word sat badly in the car.

He tried another.

"First day."

Better. Ordinary. Useful.

He kept driving.

Apex Sentinel Systems occupied three floors of a building that looked like it had been designed by people who believed sunlight should apply for permission before entering. The sign outside was brushed steel. The letters were tall, clean, and cold.

APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS

Below it, smaller:

A Duma Genesis Technologies Company

Zeth turned into the visitor lane at 06:54.

The security guard in the booth looked at him through the window, then at the Polo, then back at him. He was older, with a grey moustache and eyes that had spent years deciding people were lying before they started.

"Morning."

"Morning, sir."

"Staff?"

"Intern. First day."

The guard's eyebrows shifted by one millimetre. "Orientation starts later."

"Yes, sir."

"You are early."

"Yes, sir."

The guard looked at him for another moment, then lowered his eyes to the clipboard. "Name?"

"Zeth Mnguni."

The pen stopped.

Not for long. Half a second maybe. Less. A pause small enough to deny. Then the guard found the page, ticked something, and passed a visitor parking slip through the window.

"Basement two. Bay V-twelve. Take your ID and appointment letter to reception."

"Thank you."

The boom lifted.

Zeth drove in carefully.

Basement two smelled like all basements: concrete, dust, old water, and cars worth more than houses. The Polo looked suddenly humble between a black Mercedes and a silver BMW whose tyres seemed personally educated. Zeth parked in V-twelve, straightened the car twice, switched off the engine, and sat with both hands still on the wheel.

06:59.

He was not late.

That should have been enough.

He checked the document folder again anyway. ID. Appointment letter. Certified copies. Bank letter. Academic transcripts. Academy certificate.

His thumb rested on the Duma Foundation crest.

He put the folder away.

The lift from the basement opened into a lobby too polished for ordinary footsteps. Light ran across the floor in long rectangles. A glass wall showed the street outside waking into money. On the opposite side, turnstiles stood before a bank of security gates and a reception desk staffed by a woman whose smile looked professional enough to survive complaints.

Behind the desk, a screen cycled through company messages.

WELCOME TO APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS

INTEGRITY. PRECISION. TRUST.

Then:

DUMA GENESIS TECHNOLOGIES: BUILT FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

Zeth stood near the entrance and waited.

People arrived in clean streams.

They tapped cards, pressed fingers, leaned toward scanners, stepped through gates, and became absorbed by the building. Nobody looked surprised by glass. Nobody looked at the floor to check whether their shoes belonged. A man in a navy suit laughed into a phone and said something about Pretoria. Two women walked past discussing a client presentation. A courier argued with security about a package that apparently contained

nothing dangerous except someone's impatience.

Zeth watched all of it.

The academy had taught him how to enter rooms.

Shoulders level. Chin neutral. Hands visible. Eyes moving but not hunting. Never look lost. Lost boys were corrected. Lost men were used.

At 07:18, another young man entered the lobby carrying a laptop bag that looked more expensive than Zeth's jacket. Blond hair. Blue shirt. No tie. He glanced at the security desk, at the turnstiles, then at Zeth. For a second their eyes met with the quick mutual assessment of people who might be forced to share a table later.

The young man smiled slightly, as if the building had told a private joke.

Zeth looked away first.

Not today.

At 07:31, the receptionist called him.

"Mr Mnguni?"

The title landed again.

Zeth walked to the desk. "Yes."

"You're here for the internship orientation?"

"Yes."

"ID, please."

He gave it to her with the appointment letter. She checked the letter, then the ID, then her screen. Her nails moved quickly over the keyboard. A small printer behind her coughed out a temporary badge.

"You'll need to complete biometric registration before the gate opens," she said. "Right index finger on the scanner."

Zeth looked at the black glass pad mounted beside the desk.

"Registration?" he asked.

"Standard first-day access."

Of course.

Standard.

He placed his index finger on the scanner.

He expected the machine to think. He expected the receptionist to ask him to lift and press again, roll the finger, try the thumb, clean the pad, wait for some supervisor who knew the software password. Systems did not usually accept new people gracefully. New people were friction.

The scanner flashed green almost immediately.

A soft tone sounded.

On the receptionist's screen, a line appeared before she could finish reaching for the mouse.

MNGUNI, ZETH

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

STATUS: ACCEPTED

The receptionist smiled. "There we go. Fast one."

Zeth kept his finger on the glass for half a breath too long.

"Mr Mnguni?"

He lifted his hand.

"Sorry."

"No problem." She clipped the temporary badge into a plastic holder and passed it to him. "Please wear this visibly. Orientation is on the third floor. The lift will only open after seven forty-five, so you can wait by the seating area."

Zeth took the badge.

His name sat under the Apex logo like it had always known where to print itself.

He walked toward the seating area, then stopped beside the turnstiles.

Behind him, someone else's scan failed. The gate gave a low rejecting sound. The man cursed softly, wiped his finger on his trousers, and tried again.

Zeth looked at his own fingertip.

Apex had never taken his print.

Not in the interview. Not in the appointment process. Not in any office he remembered.

The academy had.

Home Affairs had.

Bursary administrators had.

Doors from childhood had opened and closed around fingerprints, forms, signatures, approvals, and adults who always seemed to know where he was supposed to go before he did.

He told himself there were databases. Shared systems. Preloaded files. Efficient onboarding. Duma Foundation candidates probably arrived packaged for companies like this, certificates and biometrics already tied with a neat institutional ribbon.

It made sense.

That was the problem.

The gate in front of him opened with a clean green light.

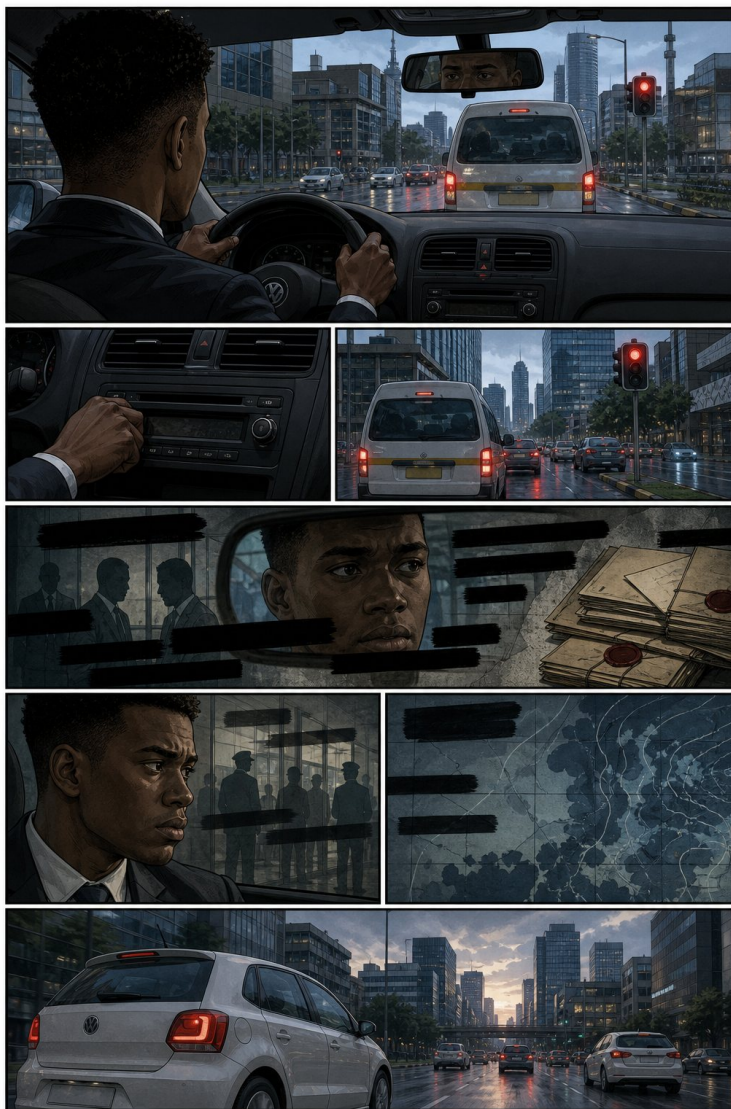
Zeth stepped through.

The system already knew him.

Panel Door Preview: 3 January

A rotating selection of 1 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 2.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 07 - Responsible citizens



The news called fear responsible and kept moving.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #StateRecordsProtectionBill #JohannesburgTraffic #Genesis #PanelDoor

Chapter 3: Orientation

The gate closed behind Zeth with a sound too soft for the size of the thing it had done.

Not a bang.

Not a warning.

Just a clean click behind his back, as if the building had decided the matter and moved on.

He stood on the other side of the turnstiles with his temporary badge clipped to his jacket, his folder under one arm, and his right index finger still feeling warmer than the rest of him.

The system already knew him.

That was nonsense.

Systems did not know people. Systems knew records. Names. ID numbers. Photographs flattened into rectangles. Fingerprints converted into patterns. Permissions assigned by people who never had to see what those permissions did to a life.

Zeth knew that.

He had known it since he was old enough to understand that adults could use the word "file" when they meant "boy."

So he told himself the scanner had not known him. It had known an onboarding record loaded by HR. Or the Duma Foundation Academy had sent biometric confirmation ahead. Or Apex Sentinel Systems shared some secure compliance system with the foundation, and the receptionist had not felt the need to explain because receptionists were not hired to narrate infrastructure to nervous interns at seven in the morning.

All of those explanations made sense.

The fact that they made sense did not comfort him.

He moved away from the gate.

The lobby had been designed by people who believed anxiety could be polished out of a room. The floor reflected light in neat white rectangles. The reception desk curved like it had never held paperwork with coffee stains on it. Thin planters divided the waiting area from the main path, their leaves glossy and obedient. Above the lift bank, screens rotated through corporate sentences that sounded expensive.

INTEGRITY. PRECISION. TRUST.

Then:

SECURE SYSTEMS FOR A CHANGING AFRICA.

Then:

APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS WELCOMES THE 2011 INTERN COHORT.

There it was.

Proof that he belonged, at least in the grammatical sense.

Zeth walked to the seating area and took the chair closest to the wall. It gave him a clear line to reception, the gates, the lift, and the glass doors facing the street. The academy had never formally taught boys how to sit in waiting rooms, but everything useful had a version of itself in training.

Back to a solid surface.

Hands calm.

Eyes moving.

Need hidden.

The badge pressed against his chest when he sat. He looked down.

ZETH MNGUNI

PROVISIONAL INTERN

The font was too neat. Too final for plastic that would be thrown away at the end of the week.

People kept arriving.

The first wave looked like power on schedule. Men in dark suits with leather shoes that did not make noise. Women in heels, fitted jackets, and faces already arranged for meetings. A man with silver hair walked through the gate without slowing and a younger employee near reception straightened as if his spine had received an email. Two women passed Zeth arguing about a tender presentation in low voices. One said "legal will never clear that phrasing" and the other said "legal clears what legal is told to understand."

Zeth watched them disappear into the lifts.

That was the company he had dressed for.

Then the next wave arrived.

A man in cargo shorts came through the gate wearing sandals and a hoodie with LINUX CONF 2008 faded across the back. His calves looked cold. He balanced a laptop under one arm and a takeaway coffee in the other, pressed his thumb to the scanner, and yawned through the green light.

A woman with pink headphones around her neck walked in wearing black jeans, a T-shirt with a cartoon robot on it, and sneakers that had been loved past respectability. Her lanyard swung with three access cards and what looked like a USB drive shaped like a tiny circuit board. Security did not blink.

Behind her came a man in grey sweatpants, a zip-up fleece, and flip-flops. He said "morning" to the receptionist with the exhausted intimacy of someone who had deployed something at two in the morning and had not yet forgiven daylight.

Zeth looked at his suit.

The jacket was not new. Nothing important in Zeth's life had ever been new the first time he needed it. KB knew a man who knew a cousin whose boss had lost weight and sold three suits for cash. The sleeves were nearly right. The shoulders were close enough. In the mirror, with his jaw tight and his hands smoothing the lapels, Zeth had almost looked like the version of himself the email had addressed.

Now, under Apex light, he looked like he was waiting to sell life insurance to somebody's uncle in 1996.

He sat very still.

The email had said casual.

Casual was not an instruction. It was a trap pretending to be a mood.

At the academy, vague instructions were where punishment lived. Dress appropriately. Behave normally. Prepare properly. Respect the room. Boys who guessed wrong were told they should have known better. Boys who guessed too little were called lazy. Boys who guessed too much were mocked before being corrected.

So Zeth had dressed for no correction.

He had dressed for doors.

A cleaner pushed a trolley past him. She glanced at his suit, then at his badge.

"First day?"

Zeth looked up. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "You look like you are going to fire somebody."

He almost laughed. It came out through his nose.

"Not today," he said.

"Good. Start small."

She rolled the trolley away.

At seven forty-five, the lift display above the silver doors changed from locked to available. The receptionist lifted her hand toward Zeth.

"Third floor, Mr Mnguni."

He stood too quickly, then slowed himself down as if speed had been the mistake. As he crossed the lobby, the blond young man from earlier stepped through the gate behind him. Blue shirt. No tie. Slim beige trousers cropped above expensive shoes. A jacket hung loose over one shoulder like it had agreed to participate only part-time.

The young man saw Zeth, then the lift.

"Third floor?" he asked.

His accent was South African but private-school polished, the kind of English that did not need to announce its passport because the vowels had already done so.

"Yes," Zeth said.

"Internship?"

Zeth nodded.

The young man smiled again, that small private smile from the lobby.

"Good," he said. "I was starting to worry I had dressed like a minor scandal for the wrong building."

The lift opened.

Zeth stepped in.

The young man followed.

For three floors they stood side by side, reflected in the lift doors.

Zeth saw himself first. Dark suit. White shirt. Tie too severe. Folder clamped under his arm. Shoes polished until the cracks tried to look intentional.

Then he saw the young man beside him. Loose jacket. No tie. Shirt open at the throat. Hair arranged with the careless precision of money pretending it had not met a mirror.

Two versions of wrong.

Only one looked deliberate.

"Ruan," the young man said, offering his hand.

Zeth shook it. "Zeth."

"Zeth," Ruan repeated, as if testing the shape. "Strong name."

"It was there before me."

Ruan's smile widened properly for the first time. "Useful. Saves effort."

The lift opened onto the third floor.

Apex's orientation room had glass walls on two sides and a view over a slice of Johannesburg that looked washed and organised from that height. The city always performed better at a distance. Close up it had potholes, shouting, burnt oil, and men selling phone chargers between lanes. From the third floor, it looked like a plan.

Inside the room, a long table had been arranged with eleven places. Each place had a notebook, a black Apex pen, a lanyard, a sealed envelope, and a bottle of water. A screen at the front displayed the same message from the lobby.

WELCOME 2011 INTERN COHORT

Most of the interns had already arrived.

Zeth counted automatically.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

With him and Ruan, ten.

One empty chair near the front.

He hated that he counted. He hated more that counting helped.

The room had its own language, and everyone else seemed to speak at least some of it. The men had mostly read casual as chinos, golfers, button-down shirts, neat sneakers, and haircuts that belonged to barbers with appointment books. The women had translated it into blouses, cardigans, dark jeans, flats, clean dresses, and jewellery quiet enough for HR but not quiet enough to be mistaken for school.

No one wore a full suit.

Except Zeth.

Ruan was not in a full suit, but he still pulled attention. His clothes did not say nervous. They said chosen. The kind of outfit a rich boy could wear on the first day of a corporate internship because if anyone questioned him, it would become evidence of his creativity.

Zeth took a seat near the middle. Ruan sat beside him without asking.

Of course he did.

Names floated across the table as people introduced themselves in small clusters before the official beginning.

Lesedi Mokoena, data science, Wits honours, round glasses and a face that seemed to be listening to everything at once.

Priya Naidoo, legal and compliance, Durban, sharp bob, sharper notebook, smile warm enough to hide the fact that she was already evaluating clauses in the welcome pack.

Tumi Khumalo, corporate communications, relaxed posture, expensive phone, someone in her family definitely knew someone in someone else's family.

Arno van Rensburg, business analysis, rugby shoulders, watch too large, confidence worn like aftershave.

The others blurred at first into clean shirts and polished ambition. Zeth stored what he could. Names could wait. Patterns could not.

Who interrupted.

Who apologised.

Who knew how to make strangers laugh.

Who said "my dad" as if the phrase came with a security clearance.

Arno looked at Zeth's tie.

"You came prepared, hey?"

It was not cruel. That was almost worse. Cruelty gave a person somewhere to put anger. Polite amusement just entered the body and made furniture.

Zeth looked at him.

"That was the plan."

"Respect." Arno lifted both hands. "My mother tried to put me in a blazer. I told her, Ma, relax. In engineering, if we're wearing closed shoes, it's already a black-tie event."

A few people laughed.

Zeth smiled like he had found it funny at the correct speed.

Ruan leaned back in his chair and looked down at his own shoes.

"I wore leather," he said. "So I am basically senior management."

The laugh moved toward him more easily.

Zeth glanced at him.

Ruan did not look smug. He looked pleased that the room had shifted without anyone bleeding.

That annoyed Zeth.

Then, against his will, he was grateful.

The eleventh intern rushed in at 07:58 with damp hair, a backpack, and the expression of someone who had negotiated with traffic and lost on appeal. A woman in a charcoal dress entered behind him carrying a tablet and the kind of smile that made everyone sit straighter without being asked.

"Good morning, everyone."

The room quieted.

"My name is Nandi Mthembu. I manage graduate programmes and early-career development for Apex Sentinel Systems. Welcome."

She said welcome as if it had a policy number.

The interns straightened, smiled, nodded, arranged themselves into opportunity.

Zeth opened the notebook at his place. The first page was blank except for the Apex logo at the bottom corner. He clicked the pen once, stopped, then placed it parallel to the notebook spine.

Ruan noticed.

Of course he did.

Nandi began with history.

Apex Sentinel Systems had started as a small security software company focused on access control and compliance tools. It had grown into one of the country's most trusted providers of secure identity systems, public-sector infrastructure support, and enterprise risk technology. It had been strengthened through strategic partnerships. It had become part of the wider Duma Genesis Technologies family.

The screen changed.

A photograph of Diego Duma appeared behind Nandi's shoulder.

Zeth's pen stopped moving.

Diego looked younger in the corporate photograph than he had on the billboard, but not by much. Some men aged by becoming softer. Diego Duma seemed to age by becoming more expensive. Grey at the temples. Smile controlled. Suit perfect. Eyes warm enough for the camera and cold enough for the contract behind it.

"Many of you know Mr Duma's story," Nandi said. "A pioneer in African technology investment. A believer in secure infrastructure as a democratic necessity. A man who has built companies, bursary programmes, and partnerships across the continent."

Zeth wrote nothing.

Across the table, Tumi looked impressed in a way that might have been genuine or well-practised. Arno nodded like the photograph confirmed

something he had already chosen to believe. Priya wrote democratic necessity in her notebook and underlined necessity once. Lesedi watched the slide without blinking.

Ruan leaned slightly toward Zeth.

"You Duma Foundation?" he asked softly.

Zeth kept his eyes forward. "Academy."

"Ah."

There was no insult in it.

There was still a door in it.

Nandi moved on to values.

Integrity. Precision. Trust.

Responsibility.

Excellence.

Confidentiality.

The words filled the screen in heavy white letters. Each one landed like furniture being placed inside a room he was expected to live in.

"We work with sensitive systems," Nandi said. "Government clients. Financial institutions. Large private-sector partners. Records that affect people's ability to move, work, trade, travel, and prove who they are. That means trust is not a slogan here. It is an operating condition."

Zeth wrote that down.

Trust is an operating condition.

He did not know yet whether he believed it or only wanted to remember who had said it.

"There are a few rules we take seriously from day one," Nandi continued.
"No external drives. No copying internal documents. No forwarding work material to personal email. No discussing client systems outside approved channels. No exploring environments you have not been assigned to. If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it."

Zeth looked up.

The sentence stayed in the room after she moved past it.

If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it.

The academy had said the same thing with doors.

Being able to open a cupboard did not mean you were allowed to eat.

Being able to run faster than another boy did not mean you were allowed to arrive first.

Being able to solve a problem did not mean you were allowed to know why the problem existed.

Ruan drew a small square in the corner of his notebook, then shaded half of it.

Zeth looked away before Ruan could catch him watching.

The morning divided itself into sessions.

HR forms.

Tax forms.

Banking details.

An explanation of leave, though nobody looked brave enough to imagine taking it.

A talk from legal about confidentiality agreements. Priya's posture changed during that one. She did not sit straighter because she was already straight. She simply became more present, like a blade being taken from its cover.

A man from compliance told them that Apex did not punish mistakes quickly if mistakes were disclosed quickly.

Zeth wrote:

Mistakes must confess before people do.

Then he scratched a line through it because it sounded too dramatic for a notebook that might be seen by HR.

At 09:46, the lights dimmed automatically.

Nandi smiled at the room.

"Before we break for tea, we have a short welcome message from Mr Duma."

The screen went black.

Then Diego Duma filled it.

This time not a still photograph. Moving. Breathing. Smiling.

"Good morning, Apex interns."

His voice settled into the room before the speakers had finished adjusting.

Zeth's hand closed around the pen.

"You are joining us at a very important time," Diego said. "Across Africa, institutions are learning that the future does not arrive all at once. It arrives through systems. Through records. Through trust. Through young people willing to build what previous generations only imagined."

The room listened.

Zeth tried to listen with it.

He heard glass.

Not the glass wall of the orientation room.

Older glass.

Thicker.

A man speaking behind it, voice smooth one moment and sharp the next.

His father's hand came down on a desk.

Not hard enough to break it.

Hard enough to make a child stop breathing.

"Ayanda, take him out."

Was that his father's voice?

Or someone else's?

There had been papers on the desk. A chair knocked slightly aside. Menzi Mnguni's shoulders, broad and shaking with anger he was trying not to let become fear.

Diego's voice continued from the screen.

"At Duma Genesis Technologies, and here at Apex Sentinel Systems, we believe responsible innovation begins with disciplined curiosity."

Disciplined curiosity.

Zeth tasted metal.

The memory moved away from him before he could grab it.

That was how the old things behaved. They arrived without permission, left without explanation, and punished him for not being ready.

"Mr Mnguni?"

Zeth blinked.

Ruan was looking at him. Not openly. Sideways, polite enough to become deniable.

"You good?"

Zeth loosened his grip on the pen.

"Fine."

The pen had left a small blue point in the page where it had been pressed too hard.

On-screen, Diego smiled at all eleven of them.

"Welcome to Apex," he said. "Build carefully. The country will need what you make."

The video ended.

The lights came back.

Everyone clapped.

Zeth clapped too, because not clapping would have been information.

Nandi thanked the screen.

Then she told them they could take ten minutes for tea.

People stood. Chairs scraped. The room woke into conversation.

Zeth remained seated for half a second longer than everyone else.

Ruan stood beside him.

"That man could sell a firewall to a candle," he said.

Zeth looked at him.

Ruan's face was innocent.

Too innocent.

Zeth surprised himself by laughing.

It was small.

It helped.

"You always talk like that?" Zeth asked.

"Only when surrounded by values."

Ruan gestured toward the door.

"Tea?"

Zeth stood. "I need the bathroom."

"Corporate survival rule number one: never ignore infrastructure."

"You made that up."

"All rules are made up by someone. I am simply entering the market early."

Zeth left before he could laugh again.

The bathroom on the third floor was too clean. It smelled of lemon and cold water. The mirrors were broad and bright. They did not flatter him.

He stood before one of them and looked at the suit.

The jacket sat on his shoulders with the effort of a thing trying its best. The tie cut a dark line down his chest. The shirt collar had begun to tighten around his neck as if it knew too much. His face looked older than it had in the apartment mirror that morning. Not more mature. Just more visible.

He removed the tie first.

The relief embarrassed him.

Then he took off the jacket.

Underneath, the white shirt was acceptable. Still too formal, but no longer a full confession. He rolled the sleeves twice, then unrolled them because the fabric fought him. He rolled them again, slower. Better.

He folded the tie into the inside pocket of the jacket, then held the jacket over his arm.

Now he looked like a man who had survived a meeting.

Not like a man who had misunderstood one.

He stared at himself.

"You are not here to be dressed correctly," he whispered.

The bathroom door opened.

A man with a beard and a black hoodie walked in, saw Zeth speaking to the mirror, and made the quick generous decision to pretend he had not.

"Sharp," the man said, nodding at the jacket.

Zeth picked up his folder. "Thanks."

"No worries. Client meeting?"

"Intern."

The man paused with his hand under the dryer.

"Yoh," he said. "HR did you dirty."

Then he laughed, not unkindly, and washed his hands.

Zeth laughed because there was no other exit.

When he returned to the orientation room, the jacket over his arm felt louder than when it had been on his body.

He left it folded on the back of his chair and joined the others near the tea station outside the room. Coffee urns. Tea bags. Biscuits arranged with corporate optimism. Small cups that made everyone hold their hands like careful people.

Lesedi stood beside the sugar.

"You okay?" she asked.

Zeth looked at her.

"Yes."

"You had the face people get when a video uses the word innovation too many times."

He glanced toward the room.

"Maybe I am sensitive to innovation."

Lesedi smiled. "Healthy. It spreads if untreated."

He liked her immediately and distrusted that too.

Arno was telling a story about a school tour to Parliament. Tumi laughed at the right moments while scanning the room as if laughter was part of a larger strategy. Priya stood with another intern, already discussing whether the confidentiality agreement had overreached on personal devices.

Ruan appeared with two cups.

"Coffee," he said, passing one to Zeth.

Zeth took it. "I didn't ask."

"You looked like a person planning to ask too late."

"You always this helpful?"

"No. First day special."

The coffee was bad.

Zeth drank it anyway.

The next session began with the track placements.

Nandi tapped her tablet. "You will spend today together, then begin shadowing in your assigned teams from tomorrow. Some of you will rotate across departments over the next two weeks. Two of you are going directly into software engineering."

Zeth did not look up too quickly.

"Ruan Bekker."

Ruan lifted his hand lazily. "Still here."

"And Zeth Mnguni."

The room turned toward him with polite curiosity.

Zeth nodded once.

Software engineering.

The words entered him with a clean, dangerous joy.

He kept his face still.

Ruan leaned closer. "Bad luck, Mnguni."

"For who?"

Ruan made a thoughtful face. "Management, probably."

Zeth looked down before his smile could become public.

Nandi moved through the other placements. Data science. Compliance. Business analysis. Public-sector solutions. Communications. Infrastructure. Each intern received a future version of themselves and tried not to hold it too tightly.

After that came more rules.

Where they could go.

Where they could not go.

How to use the intranet.

How not to use the intranet.

How to report suspicious behaviour.

How suspicious behaviour included "unusual curiosity regarding unrelated systems."

Zeth wrote that phrase down exactly.

Unusual curiosity.

There was no such thing.

Only curiosity that had annoyed someone powerful enough to rename it.

By 10:52, the jacket on the back of his chair had become a separate person in the room. It sat behind him like an uncle waiting to complain. Every time Zeth shifted, the plastic garment cover whispered from where he had folded it underneath, because KB had insisted the suit deserved protection even if the world did not.

He needed to put it in the car.

Not because anyone cared.

Because he did.

That was worse.

He waited for a pause between sessions. Nandi stepped outside to take a call. Interns opened laptops, checked phones, whispered, stretched. Zeth looked at the door, then at Ruan.

Ruan was drawing another square.

"What time is break?" Zeth asked.

Ruan looked up. "Now-ish."

"No, I mean official break."

"Official?"

"I need to get something from my car."

Ruan's eyebrows lifted with a softness that was almost mercy.

Before he could answer, the hoodie man from the bathroom walked past carrying a laptop and a mug that said I COMMIT, THEREFORE I AM.

Zeth turned to him without thinking.

"Sorry. What time is break?"

The man stopped.

He looked at Zeth.

Then at the badge.

Then at the jacket.

"Break?" he said.

"Yes."

"My bru, this is not high school. If you need to go, go. Just don't disappear so long we have to make a ticket."

Ruan coughed into his fist.

Lesedi turned away, but her shoulders betrayed her.

Zeth felt heat rise from his collar into his face.

"Sharp," he said.

The hoodie man pointed at him with the mug. "Also, don't say sharp too much in meetings. They will make you do minutes."

Then he continued down the corridor.

This time everyone near enough laughed.

Zeth laughed too.

It was either that or die standing.

"He has a point," Ruan said.

"About high school?"

"About minutes. Terrible fate."

Zeth picked up his jacket, tie hidden inside it, and took his folder because leaving documents unattended felt like leaving a child near traffic.

"I'll be back."

"I will tell them you went to fight the dress code."

"Tell them I won."

"Brave. Premature, but brave."

Zeth left the orientation room before Ruan could make him smile again.

The corridor outside had quieted. Doors stood closed along both sides, each with a small sign and an access panel beside it. Software Engineering. Boardroom 3A. Public Sector Solutions. Server Operations. Records Intake.

Zeth slowed at the last one.

Records Intake.

The sign was plain. The access panel beside the door glowed red.

Behind the frosted glass, figures moved. Not clearly. Shadows. A trolley. Someone carrying what looked like document boxes.

Zeth looked away.

Unusual curiosity.

He kept walking.

At the lifts, only one button worked for his badge. Ground. The basement button ignored him. He pressed ground and told himself he could walk from there to parking. The lift arrived empty.

On the ground floor, the lobby had changed texture. Morning rush had ended. Reception moved at a lower hum. Security stood near the gates speaking softly to a courier. A woman at the far side of the lobby seemed to be reading the building directory.

No.

Not reading.

Photographing.

She stood with her phone held low, angled just enough that it could be mistaken for checking a message if nobody looked properly. Her hair was pulled back. She wore a cream blouse under a dark jacket, jeans clean enough to pass a casual office rule, and a visitor sticker placed slightly crooked near her collarbone.

Zeth noticed the sticker first.

VISITOR

Under it, in smaller print:

L. DLAMINI

She noticed him noticing.

Her phone lowered immediately.

"If you are security," she said, "your suit is losing discipline."

Zeth stopped.

He still had the jacket over his arm.

"If you are a visitor," he said, "your sticker is losing altitude."

She looked down at the crooked sticker, then back at him.

"It is my first day being stickered."

"It shows."

"And you are?"

"Going to my car."

Her eyes moved over the jacket and folder.

"With evidence?"

"Laundry."

"At ten in the morning?"

"Apex values efficiency."

She smiled then.

Not politely.

Properly.

It changed her face quickly and then vanished, as if she had remembered she was doing something else with it.

"Lindi," she said.

"Your sticker said that already."

"Rude to trust stickers before people."

"Zeth."

"Does your badge say that too?"

"Unfortunately."

She leaned half a step closer, close enough that he saw a small ink mark on the side of her thumb. Not a tattoo. Pen. Someone who wrote by hand and forgot to wash all the evidence away.

"First day, Zeth?"

"What gave it away?"

"You still believe the arrows."

He glanced toward the wayfinding sign beside the lift.

Basement parking pointed left.

Visitor meeting rooms pointed right.

Records and operations pointed through a restricted corridor behind reception.

Lindi's body was angled toward the restricted corridor.

"And you don't?" he asked.

"I believe arrows were drawn by people who wanted fewer questions."

"That sounds inefficient."

"Only if answers are the point."

They looked at each other for one second too long.

The lobby noise thinned around them.

Zeth became aware of his own hand tightening on the jacket. Lindi became aware of his awareness. Her chin lifted slightly, defensive before amused.

"You work here?" he asked.

"Today I am being received here."

"That is not an answer."

"It is a beautiful answer. You just wanted information."

"Most answers contain some."

"Not in corporate buildings."

He should have left.

He did not.

"Why are you photographing the directory?"

Her expression did not change enough to count as panic. Good discipline. Bad luck.

"Why are you carrying your jacket like it testified against you?"

"Heat."

"The air conditioning is fighting for its life."

"Fashion heat."

"Ah." She nodded gravely. "Dangerous."

Zeth looked toward reception. The security guard had finished with the courier and was turning.

Lindi followed his gaze.

"Do you know where Media Liaison is?" she asked, louder now, performing for the room.

Zeth looked at the directory.

Media Liaison was not listed.

He looked back at her.

"Second floor," he said.

She blinked once.

"Thank you."

"The lift won't take you there without the right access."

"Then I suppose I should find the right person."

"Or the right arrow."

That smile came again, faster this time.

"Careful, Zeth. First days are when buildings decide what kind of person you are."

"I thought people did that."

"People are slower."

"Mr Mnguni?"

The receptionist's voice cut across the lobby.

Zeth turned.

"You need the parking gate opened?"

He looked back.

Lindi was already walking away from the directory, not toward the visitor meeting rooms and not quite toward reception. She moved like someone who had learned that hesitation was louder than footsteps.

At the corner near the lifts, she glanced back once.

Then she was gone.

Zeth stood there with his suit jacket over his arm and the feeling that he had just misplaced a question.

"Mr Mnguni?" the receptionist repeated.

"Yes," he said. "Please."

The trip to the basement took less than two minutes.

He placed the jacket and tie on the back seat of the Polo, then stood beside the open door longer than necessary.

The car smelled faintly of dashboard polish, old fabric, and KB's cigarettes, even though KB swore he never smoked inside vehicles unless the vehicle had personally offended him. The smell steadied Zeth. It reminded him that the building above him was not the whole world. There was still a yard in Soweto. A grass mat. Gogo's hand in his. Thobile's mouth saying his name like it had opinions.

He looked at himself in the driver's window.

White shirt.

Dark trousers.

No tie.

No jacket.

Still too formal.

Less trapped.

"Good," he said.

The basement did not answer.

On his way back, the fingerprint scanner accepted him again.

Fast.

Too fast.

The receptionist did not notice. Why would she? The scanner was supposed to accept people. A door opening was not a mystery to someone whose job was to watch doors open all day.

When Zeth returned to the orientation room, Nandi was mid-sentence.

"...so please keep your temporary cards visible at all times. Permanent access will be finalised after departmental sign-off."

Zeth slipped into his seat.

Ruan leaned toward him without looking away from the front.

"Victory?"

"Conditional surrender."

"Very corporate."

On the table in front of each intern, Nandi had placed a new plastic card. Unlike the paper badge at Zeth's chest, these were hard white cards with the Apex logo in the corner and a silver chip embedded near the bottom.

"These are your temporary access cards," Nandi said. "They are restricted to the lobby, third floor common areas, cafeteria, and your assigned department once your supervisor activates the placement. Do not lend them

to anyone. Do not tailgate through secure doors. Do not test doors. I know some of you are technical. Consider this my loving HR warning."

Some of the room laughed.

Zeth did not.

Do not test doors.

The cards moved around the table as interns checked names.

Ruan lifted his and inspected it against the light.

"Disappointing," he said. "I was hoping for a laser."

Priya, across from him, said, "Legal would never."

"Legal fears joy."

"Legal fears liability."

"Same family."

Zeth picked up his card.

It was cold from the table.

ZETH MNGUNI

INTERN COHORT 2011

TEMPORARY ACCESS

It looked ordinary.

Ordinary was beginning to feel personal.

Nandi directed them to tap the card against the reader beside the orientation room door one by one. The reader would confirm activation and print their department stickers from the small label printer on the side table.

Arno went first.

Green light.

BUSINESS ANALYSIS

Tumi.

Green light.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Priya.

Green light.

LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE

Lesedi.

Green light.

DATA SCIENCE

The room turned the process into casual conversation. People joked about how serious the machine sounded. Someone asked if infrastructure got better coffee. Someone else said legal probably had the best chairs.

Ruan went before Zeth.

He tapped the card.

Green light.

The small screen blinked:

RUAN BEKKER

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

TRACK: SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

The label printer coughed out a sticker.

Ruan peeled it off and stuck it carefully to the back of his notebook instead of the card.

Nandi sighed.

"Mr Bekker."

"Testing adhesion."

"Test compliance."

"Yes, ma'am."

He moved aside, smiling.

Zeth stepped forward.

The card felt heavier than it was.

He tapped it against the reader.

Green light.

The screen blinked.

MNGUNI, ZETH

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

Then the screen flickered.

For less than a second, the letters changed.

Not all of them.

Enough.

ACCESS CLASS: ARCHIVE / LEGACY

Zeth stopped breathing.

The screen corrected itself.

TRACK: SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

The label printer made a small, cheerful sound.

A sticker slid out.

Nandi reached for it.

"Software engineering," she said.

Zeth looked at the screen.

It looked back with ordinary words.

"Mr Mnguni?"

He took the sticker.

"Thank you."

His voice worked. That surprised him.

He returned to his seat.

Ruan was busy trying to align his sticker perfectly on the temporary card while Nandi watched him with tired disappointment. Lesedi was laughing softly into her hand. Priya was reading the back of the card for fine print.

No one had seen it.

Or no one had reacted.

Zeth placed the card on the table.

White plastic.

Black letters.

Silver chip.

Temporary access.

He tried to make the wrong line blur. Tried to tell himself it had been a screen refresh. A loading artifact. Residue from someone else's access profile. A meaningless flicker in a cheap reader attached to an expensive building.

All reasonable explanations.

Again.

His fingertip warmed where it had touched the first scanner downstairs.

Nandi began explaining lunch vouchers.

Ruan whispered something about whether vouchers counted as currency under legal tender law. Priya heard him and whispered that she would not represent him. The room laughed again, alive with people learning how to become colleagues.

Zeth looked at his card.

The card had corrected itself.

Zeth remembered the wrong line.

Panel Door Preview: Orientation

A rotating selection of 3 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 3.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 05 - Eleven Seats



Opportunity had assigned seats.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #InternCohort #Orientation #Genesis #PanelDoor

Page 09 - Not High School



Freedom arrived wearing a hoodie and saying go.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #Akusonalsikole #OfficeComedy #ApexSentinelSystems #PanelDoor

Page 11 - The Wrong Arrow



Some people follow arrows. Some ask who painted them.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #LindiDlamini #CorporateThriller #ZethMnguni #PanelDoor

Chapter 4: The Locked Folder

The tie stayed in the Polo.

Zeth stood in the parking basement the next morning with his hand on the car door and looked at it lying across the passenger seat like an old accusation.

Dark blue.

Slightly shiny at the knot from years of other men's fingers.

Folded once because he could not make himself throw it onto the seat like ordinary cloth.

He had worn the suit trousers again, because they were the best trousers he owned, but the jacket stayed on the back seat and the shirt collar stayed open. It made him feel unfinished. Exposed. Like he had walked out of the house halfway through becoming respectable.

The email had said casual.

Apex had meant casual the way rich people meant safe.

Chinos. Golfers. Clean sneakers that looked cheap only if a person had never had to check prices.

Engineers had meant something else entirely.

The day before, a man had walked past Zeth in cargo shorts, socks with sandals, and a hoodie with a faded logo for a conference in Berlin. Nobody had stopped him. Nobody had asked if he had lost a fight with a laundry basket. Nobody had checked whether his mother had tried harder.

He had access.

That was the thing.

A person could walk into the fifth floor dressed like he had given up on mirrors if the system loved his card.

Zeth looked at the temporary white card clipped to his belt.

MNGUNI, ZETH

SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

Plain black letters.

No wrong line.

No hidden class.

No ghost in the plastic.

He had checked it six times in the lift at Maboneng before leaving. Once in the car before starting the engine. Twice at red robots, which was stupid and dangerous, so he had forced himself to stop.

Temporary access.

That was all.

He closed the Polo and locked it.

The car chirped once.

The sound bounced around the basement.

A security camera in the corner turned slowly.

Zeth told himself it was not turning toward him.

That helped for almost three seconds.

By the time he reached reception, Apex was already awake.

The lobby did not look busy in a normal way. It looked choreographed. Coffee cups moved between hands. Shoes clicked over polished stone. A woman in a black dress spoke into a headset without changing expression. Two men in suits laughed at a private joke with the careful volume of people who wanted witnesses to know they were relaxed.

The turnstiles waited in a neat row.

Glass arms.

Black pads.

Green lights for the approved.

Red for the confused.

Zeth placed his card against the reader.

Green.

The gate opened.

No flicker.

He placed his finger on the scanner beside the second gate because the guard nodded toward it.

Green again.

Fast.

Too fast, but no faster than yesterday.

"Morning, Mr Mnguni," the guard said.

Zeth lifted his hand from the scanner.

"Morning."

The guard had not looked at his ID.

He had not checked a clipboard.

He had just known the name from the screen.

Reasonable.

Systems displayed names.

That was their job.

Zeth stepped through.

Ruan Bekker was waiting near the lifts with a paper cup in one hand and a pastry in the other, dressed like he had discovered a loophole in the idea of effort.

Loose jacket.

No tie.

Shirt open at the throat.

Hair arranged with the careless precision of money pretending it had not met a mirror.

"There he is," Ruan said. "The man has adapted."

Zeth looked down at his own shirt.

"I am still dressed."

"Progress is not always dramatic."

Ruan offered him the pastry.

Zeth looked at it.

"What is that?"

"Breakfast."

"It has icing."

"I said what I said."

Zeth took it because refusing food was disrespectful and because his stomach had been pretending discipline was nutrition since five.

The lift opened.

They stepped inside with a woman carrying three laptops, a man with a yoga mat under one arm, and an older accountant who wore a waistcoat like it contained moral authority.

Ruan leaned toward Zeth.

"For the record, if we see an engineer wearing shoes today, I will salute."

Zeth kept his face straight.

"You cannot salute in a lift."

"Of course you can. You just have to commit."

The woman with the laptops smiled at the floor.

The accountant did not.

On the third floor, most of yesterday's interns got out.

Lesedi waved as she moved toward the data science section with a notebook hugged to her chest. Priya walked beside Nandi Mthembu, already asking a question that contained three smaller questions inside it. Tumi was on her phone, laughing softly at something that did not sound funny enough to deserve it.

Arno glanced back at Zeth and Ruan.

"Good luck in the basement," he said.

"Fifth floor," Ruan said.

"Same spirit."

The lift doors closed before Ruan could answer.

He nodded slowly.

"I am beginning to think Arno was raised by motivational posters and unsecured loans."

Zeth bit into the pastry to hide the laugh.

The fifth floor opened into a different Apex.

The third floor had been glass and welcome speeches. The fifth had carpet tiles, whiteboards, screens, old coffee, low voices, and the restless hum of machines pretending not to work hard.

Nobody looked up properly when the lift opened.

That unsettled Zeth more than staring would have.

On the third floor, people had assessed him. Shoes. Shirt. Accent. Watch. Confidence. Which school. Which route in. Which people he knew.

On the fifth floor, people assessed screens.

A man in a Springbok jersey stood at a whiteboard drawing boxes inside boxes. A woman with silver headphones typed with both hands and one raised eyebrow. Someone laughed from behind a monitor and said, "No, if finance built it, the button is probably decorative." Two engineers argued about a server with the emotional intensity of family inheritance.

There were no motivational posters.

There was a laminated sign above the printer that read:

IF IT IS ON FIRE, LOG A TICKET BEFORE SCREAMING.

Zeth liked the fifth floor immediately.

Then he remembered the card.

He stopped liking anything.

A man rose from a desk near the far window.

He was not tall, but he carried stillness like height. Early forties, maybe. Tired face. Closely cut hair. Shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow. No tie. No jacket. A coffee mug in his hand that looked old enough to have a pension.

He looked at Ruan first, then Zeth.

Not shoes.

Not shirt.

Eyes.

"Bekker. Mnguni."

His voice was quiet enough that people had to listen properly.

"Yes, sir," Zeth said.

Ruan lifted the pastry. "Present and lightly sugared."

The man's gaze moved to the pastry.

Then back to Ruan.

"I am Sizwe Khumalo. For the next two weeks, I am your assigned supervisor. After that, if you survive me, someone with a nicer chair will decide where to put you."

Zeth straightened.

"Good morning, sir."

"Don't sir me unless there is a client in the room or you are about to confess."

Ruan pointed at Zeth with the pastry.

"He is going to struggle with that."

"I can see."

Sizwe turned and walked without checking if they followed.

They followed.

He took them past a row of desks where people had arranged their lives into small, defensive territories. Coffee mugs. Old rugby tickets. A toy robot. A photo of two children. A stack of manuals with folded corners. One desk had nothing on it except a keyboard, two monitors, and a single green apple.

Zeth tried not to look too hungry at the monitors.

At the far end of the floor, a glass door carried a small sign:

SECURE DEVELOPMENT

Under it, in smaller letters:

AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY

Sizwe tapped his card.

Green.

The door unlocked.

He held it open.

"Cards," he said.

Ruan tapped first.

Green.

"Mr Provisional Intern," Sizwe said.

Ruan stepped through. "My family is very proud."

Zeth touched his card to the reader.

For one breath, his stomach went cold.

Green.

Nothing else.

The door clicked.

Zeth entered.

Inside, the air was colder. The desks were arranged in two long islands. A cabinet of old hardware stood against one wall: routers, access pads, broken card readers, barcode scanners, small black boxes with labels curling at the edges. On another wall, a screen showed status bars for systems with names that meant nothing to Zeth yet.

Green.

Green.

Yellow.

Green.

One red square blinked, then vanished.

Zeth looked away before his face could reveal that he wanted to know why.

"Rule one," Sizwe said, stopping beside two empty desks. "You are not here to impress me."

Ruan put a hand on his chest. "That is a personal blow."

"Rule two. You are not here to prove you belong."

Zeth did not move.

Sizwe looked at him for half a second longer than he had looked at Ruan.

"Rule three. If you can see something, it does not mean you should touch it."

Nandi's voice came back from yesterday.

If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it.

Zeth nodded.

"Yes, Si..."

He caught himself.

"Yes."

Sizwe's mouth did something that was not quite a smile.

"You learn fast."

"Only when threatened."

Ruan turned to him.

"There he is."

Sizwe pointed at the desks.

"Those are yours for now. Workstations are locked down. No external drives. No personal email. No software installs. No moving code out of the sandbox. No testing clever ideas on production systems. If you don't know whether something is production, assume it is and leave it alone."

He placed two thin folders on the nearest desk.

"Your login details are inside. Change the temporary password. Do not write your new one under the keyboard. Do not write it on a sticky note. Do not tell each other. Do not make it your surname plus the year. People with

degrees do this every week and then act wounded when attacked by reality."

Ruan opened his folder.

"Can I make it Arno's surname plus the year?"

"Only if you want Arno to become your threat model."

"He already is."

Sizwe looked at Zeth.

"You are laughing inside. That counts as workplace integration."

Zeth looked down.

"I was not."

"Then we have bigger problems."

For the first time since entering Apex, Zeth felt the tension in his shoulders shift by a fraction.

Not gone.

Just moved.

A woman appeared behind Sizwe with a tablet in one hand and a black notebook tucked under her arm.

She was in her thirties, with sharp eyes, short natural hair, and a green cardigan over a plain black top. She wore no badge lanyard. Her access card was clipped to her waistband like a weapon she did not need to display.

"You started without me," she said.

"They survived the first four minutes," Sizwe said. "I was encouraged."

The woman looked at Ruan, then Zeth.

"Mira Naidoo."

Zeth stood.

Ruan half-stood, realised it looked strange, then committed and stood fully.

Mira watched this without expression.

"Sit," she said.

They sat.

"I handle security analysis for this unit. Some of what passes through these systems is sensitive. Some of it is boring and sensitive, which is worse, because people become careless when they are bored."

She placed the tablet on Zeth's desk, not gently.

"If you wander, we see it. If you test a door because you are curious, we see it. If you tell yourself you were only looking, we see that too."

Ruan glanced at Sizwe.

"Is this still orientation or have we entered the threat portion?"

"All orientation is threat," Mira said.

Ruan nodded.

"Efficient."

Mira did not smile.

Zeth liked her less than Sizwe and trusted her more than most people on the floor.

That made him uncomfortable.

Sizwe handed each of them a printed sheet.

"Low-risk tickets. Internal tool bugs. You will work in the development sandbox. Read the ticket. Reproduce the issue. Fix only the issue. Write a short note on what you changed and why. Commit to your training branch. Nothing clever."

He paused.

"Especially you."

Zeth looked up.

"I have not done anything."

"That is why I am catching you early."

Ruan whispered, "Reputation speedrun."

Zeth ignored him.

The workstation was older than he expected.

Not broken. Not bad.

Just ordinary.

A black Dell tower under the desk. Two monitors, both slightly different sizes. A keyboard with shiny spacebar edges. Windows 7 with a corporate login screen and a wallpaper of the Apex logo floating over blue light.

Zeth typed the temporary password from the folder.

The system made him change it.

He made the new password ugly enough to offend memory.

The desktop loaded slowly.

Icons appeared one by one.

Apex Dev Portal

SentinelDesk

SecureDocs

Sandbox Shell

Eclipse

SQL Client

Build Monitor

Zeth read the names without touching anything.

Ruan was already clicking.

Sizwe made a sound in his throat.

Ruan froze.

"I clicked the portal."

"Was that your ticket?"

"My ticket requires the portal."

"Read the whole ticket before your fingers become leadership."

Ruan removed his hand from the mouse with ceremony.

Zeth opened his ticket.

SD-18472

Training Sandbox: Asset Register Search Returns Duplicate Rows

Priority: Low.

Assigned to: Mnguni, Zeth.

Environment: Dev / Training.

Description:

When searching the internal asset register by partial serial number, duplicate records appear for retired access hardware. Expected behaviour: show the most recent active record only.

Do not modify production data.

Do not alter role filters.

Do not update records outside the training dataset.

Zeth read it twice.

Then a third time because Sizwe had said not to prove anything.

The bug was simple.

Too simple.

It smelled like a test.

He opened the dev portal. Slow login. A security banner. A second password prompt. Then a dashboard with grey tabs and too many acronyms.

Ruan leaned back in his chair.

"My ticket says the cafeteria voucher export crashes when the surname contains an apostrophe."

Zeth looked at him.

"That is not a software bug. That is a cultural crime."

Ruan placed a hand over his heart.

"On behalf of O'Neill, O'Connor, and O'Malley families everywhere, I accept your support."

"You are Afrikaans."

"International solidarity."

The first real laugh escaped Zeth before he could stop it.

It was small.

Still his.

Across the room, Mira looked up.

The laugh died.

Ruan lowered his voice.

"She has admin rights over joy."

Zeth shook his head, but his mouth tried to betray him.

He opened the code.

The asset register lived in a training branch of an internal Java application that looked as if three generations of developers had argued with it and all of them had lost. There were tidy files beside old files. Clear comments beside cursed ones. A function that did one thing. Another that did one thing, then five more things, then apologised in a comment from 2007.

Zeth forgot the room.

That was the dangerous part.

At first he was careful because he knew he was being watched.

Then the code began speaking.

Not beautifully.

Never that.

Code was not music. People who said that had never spent three hours looking for a missing semicolon in a language that pretended to be helpful.

But code had rhythm.

It had habit.

It had lies.

The duplicate rows were not coming from the search function. They came from a join against the access hardware table. Retired devices remained linked to their old personnel assignments, and the display layer was filtering active users but not active hardware.

He wrote down the path.

```
`AssetRegisterSearch.java`
```

```
`AccessHardwareRepository`
```

```
`status != RETIRED`
```

Then he stopped.

He made himself reproduce the bug first.

Search.

Duplicate rows.

Screenshot saved to the training issue system, not desktop.

He checked the test data.

He checked the query.

He changed one filter.

Then wrote a small test because Thabo had once said a kick you could not repeat was luck, not skill. Zeth had extended that logic to almost everything.

Run.

Fail.

Good.

Fix.

Run.

Pass.

Run the broader training suite.

Pass.

He looked at the time.

Forty-three minutes.

Too fast.

He sat back.

Ruan was staring at his own screen with an expression of cheerful offence.

"Apostrophe bug?" Zeth asked.

"Worse."

"How?"

"They fixed apostrophes by deleting apostrophes."

Zeth turned slowly.

Ruan pointed at a line of code.

There it was.

```
`surname.replace('""', '')`
```

Zeth stared.

"They made O'Connor into OConnor."

"They made Ndlovu-Mthembu into NdlovuMthembu too."

"That is not in your ticket."

"No. My ticket is the crash."

"Then fix the crash."

Ruan looked wounded.

"And leave the names disrespected?"

Zeth heard Sizwe without turning.

"Fix the ticket, Bekker."

Ruan closed his mouth.

Sizwe had not looked up from his desk.

Zeth faced his own monitor again.

He opened the commit window.

His fingers hovered.

The card line rose in his mind.

ARCHIVE / LEGACY

He closed the window.

Not because of the line.

Because something in the broader test output had moved when it should have stayed still.

He scrolled back.

Most of the logs were ordinary noise.

Build paths.

Warnings.

Deprecated libraries.

Test dataset resets.

Authentication stubs.

Role simulation.

Then a line he had not noticed the first time:

```
`WARN RoleResolver - inherited role not found in active profile:  
archive_legacy_reader`
```

Zeth stopped.

The cursor blinked.

The line sat in the log like it had been waiting for him to become quiet enough.

He did not touch the keyboard.

He read the line again.

```
`archive_legacy_reader`
```

Legacy.

Not the same words.

Close enough to make the skin at the back of his neck tighten.

He looked around.

Ruan was muttering at the apostrophe problem.

Sizwe was on the phone, turned toward the window, saying, "No, I understand what the client requested. I am saying the client requested nonsense with confidence."

Mira was not at her desk.

Zeth looked back at the screen.

The warning had occurred during setup for the test environment, before his ticket's query ran. It had nothing to do with duplicate asset records.

He knew that.

He also knew that logs were full of unrelated nonsense. Legacy systems complained the way old houses creaked. Not every sound was a message. Sometimes a warning was only a warning.

He moved the mouse to the scroll bar.

Stopped.

No exploring.

No wandering.

If you can see something, it does not mean you should touch it.

He copied nothing.

He opened his notebook.

On a clean line beneath the ticket notes, he wrote:

`RoleResolver - archive\_legacy\_reader`

Then under it:

`Why on intern sandbox?`

He stared at the question.

It looked too guilty.

He drew a box around it to make it look like ordinary technical curiosity.

That made it worse.

He turned the page.

"You finished?"

Mira's voice came from behind him.

Zeth's hand closed over the notebook.

Too fast.

He knew it as he did it.

Mira's eyes moved from his hand to the screen.

Not suspicious.

Worse.

Interested.

"The duplicate search issue?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Already?"

"It was a filter."

"Most things are. People still build careers around finding the wrong one."

She leaned past him, close enough that he smelled soap, coffee, and something like rain on wool.

"Show me."

Zeth opened the test run.

Showed the failing case.

Showed the filter.

Showed the passing result.

He kept his voice even. He did not rush. He did not overexplain. He did not look at the earlier log line.

Mira listened without nodding.

When he finished, she said, "Commit it."

He did.

The commit message was plain.

`SD-18472 filter retired access hardware from asset search`

He clicked submit.

The training branch accepted it.

Mira watched the screen until the green check appeared.

"Good."

She straightened.

Zeth breathed.

Then the left panel refreshed.

It should have stayed on the asset register project.

Instead, for less than a second, the project tree expanded by itself.

A folder appeared under the root.

Grey icon.

Locked symbol.

Partial label.

`CIVIC-BBX`

Below it, one subfolder loaded before the tree collapsed.

`media\_flags`

Then a file name.

Only a fragment.

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

The panel snapped back.

Asset register.

Training branch.

Ordinary folders.

Zeth's mouth went dry.

He had not clicked it.

He had not searched for it.

He had not done anything.

Mira had seen.

He knew because she had stopped breathing too.

Not much.

Mira Naidoo did not seem like a person who gave away whole reactions.

But there was a pause.

Small.

Sharp.

Then her hand reached past him and took the mouse.

"Move."

Zeth moved his chair back.

Ruan looked over.

"Everything okay?"

"Eyes on your ticket," Mira said.

Ruan's chair turned back immediately.

Mira clicked through the dev portal faster than Zeth could follow. Logs. Profile. Session. Role cache. Ticket link. Build trace. Her face did not change, but her fingers were angry.

Sizwe's phone call had gone quiet.

Zeth felt him looking from across the room.

Mira opened the issue queue.

The ticket Zeth had just completed sat at the top with a green status.

She selected it.

Deleted assignment.

Deleted training branch link.

Closed related logs.

The green check vanished from Zeth's queue.

The screen refreshed.

No active tickets assigned.

Zeth heard his own heartbeat.

"What was that folder?" he asked.

Mira did not look at him.

"A display artefact."

"It had a lock icon."

"Many artefacts are ambitious."

"It had a label."

Now she looked at him.

Her eyes were not angry.

That was the frightening thing.

They were measuring him.

"What did you click?"

"Nothing."

"Don't answer quickly."

Zeth swallowed.

"I ran the test suite for the ticket. I committed the fix. The project panel refreshed by itself."

"Did you search for that label?"

"No."

"Did you access a restricted directory?"

"No."

"Did you write anything down?"

His hand was still half over the notebook.

He moved it away.

Not because hiding was useless.

Because hiding badly was worse.

Mira saw the line.

`RoleResolver - archive\_legacy\_reader`

Her expression closed.

"That was in the log," Zeth said.

"I can read."

"Then you know I did not invent it."

The sentence left his mouth before discipline could catch it.

Across the room, Sizwe lowered the phone from his ear.

Mira did not blink.

"Mr Mnguni."

The formal address hit harder than shouting.

"This is not university. This is not a puzzle room. This is not a dojo where the smartest person wins because he sees the opening first."

Zeth's jaw tightened.

Dojo.

It was not a random word.

He was sure of that.

Mira continued.

"You are an intern in a secure development environment. Your responsibility is to complete assigned work and report anomalies through your supervisor.

You do not collect strange strings. You do not build private theories. You do not turn curiosity into evidence."

Ruan had gone very still at his desk.

The whole room had not stopped, but Zeth could feel the small circle around him changing pressure.

He placed both hands flat on the desk.

"I saw a permissions warning after an access-card anomaly yesterday."

Mira's face sharpened.

Sizwe's did not move.

Zeth knew, immediately, that he had said too much.

But the words were out.

And because they were out, pride tried to dress them as strategy.

"My card displayed an access class for less than a second during activation," he said. "Archive slash legacy. Then today the logs referenced archive legacy reader. Then a locked folder appeared in my project tree. I did not access it. I wrote down the warning because it is a pattern."

Silence.

Not the whole floor.

Just the part of the world that had become Zeth's desk.

Mira looked at Sizwe.

He looked back.

Something passed between them.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

That was worse.

Mira closed Zeth's notebook.

"You will not write that string again."

"It already appeared."

"And now it is handled."

"By deleting my ticket?"

"By removing a bad training assignment."

"The bug was real."

"Many real things are still not yours."

Zeth looked at the screen.

No active tickets assigned.

Clean.

As if he had done nothing.

That bothered him more than the warning.

"Do I get a new ticket?"

Mira's mouth almost softened.

Almost.

"No."

Ruan made a small sound, then pretended to cough.

Mira turned to him.

"Mr Bekker."

"Yes."

"How is the apostrophe issue?"

"Respectfully, still rude."

"Fix only the crash."

"Understood."

She turned back to Zeth.

"You will spend the rest of the morning reading the secure development guidelines."

"I read them yesterday."

"Then today you will enjoy the sequel."

She took the mouse again and opened a document from the desktop.

Apex Sentinel Secure Development Guidelines

Version 4.7.

Two hundred and thirty-one pages.

Zeth stared at it.

Ruan turned his face away so completely that his shoulders shook.

Mira leaned closer, voice lower.

"Listen carefully."

Zeth looked at her.

"If you see a strange folder, you report it. If you see a strange role, you report it. If a door opens that should not open, you do not step through to

prove you are observant. You step back."

"I stepped back."

"Good."

She straightened.

"Keep doing that."

For a second, he thought she was finished.

Then she added:

"And forget what you saw."

The words landed too neatly.

Not advice.

Not a warning.

A practiced sentence.

Mira walked away with his ticket gone and his notebook line still alive under the cover.

Zeth looked at the secure development guidelines.

Page one explained the purpose of access control.

He did not read it.

On the other side of the desk island, Sizwe Khumalo lifted his old coffee mug and took a sip without looking away from him.

Ruan waited until Mira was far enough.

Then he rolled his chair closer by two quiet pushes.

"I have questions," he whispered.

Zeth did not turn.

"Don't."

"I said I have them. I did not say I was brave enough to ask."

Zeth kept his eyes on the screen.

The document blurred.

Two hundred and thirty-one pages of policy sat in front of him, explaining the difference between access and permission.

His completed ticket was gone.

His branch link was gone.

The log view was gone.

The folder was gone.

But in his notebook, under the closed cover, the wrong line waited.

In his head, another line sat beside it.

`CIVIC-BBX`

The locked folder had disappeared.

It had still looked back.

Panel Door Preview: The Locked Folder

A rotating selection of 2 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 4.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 03 - The Fifth Floor



The fifth floor did not care what he wore. It cared what he touched.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #SoftwareEngineering #RuanBekker #TechThriller #PanelDoor

Page 06 - Low Risk Tickets



Low-risk work arrived with high-risk rules.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #Internship #SecureDevelopment #RuanBekker #PanelDoor

Chapter 5: Sizwe's Rule

There were documents written to be read, and there were documents written to make reading feel like punishment.

The Apex Sentinel Secure Development Guidelines belonged to the second family.

Version 4.7 sat open on Zeth's monitor with the clean arrogance of a thing no one had ever loved. It had headings. It had subheadings. It had diagrams with arrows pointing to boxes, and boxes pointing to smaller boxes, and footnotes that sent him to appendices where the same point had been restated with less mercy.

Page forty-two explained escalation handling.

Page forty-three explained escalation handling in exceptional circumstances.

Page forty-four explained how exceptional circumstances were not to be treated as exceptional unless approved by a person with sufficient authority to classify them as exceptional.

Zeth read the sentence twice.

Then he read it a third time because maybe the second time he had become stupid.

On the other side of the desk island, Ruan Bekker was deep in his own fight with an export function that had taken personal offence at apostrophes.

He had one hand in his hair and the other on the keyboard, his face arranged in a kind of private mourning.

"Bad news," Ruan whispered without turning.

Zeth did not look away from the guidelines.

"I am not available for bad news."

"The system accepts Van Rensburg."

"Congratulations to the system."

"It accepts Mokoena."

"We are all proud."

"It accepts Naidoo."

"You are going to tell me something racist is happening."

"No. Worse. It crashes on O'Connell."

Zeth looked at him.

Ruan's eyes were bright with offended scholarship.

"An Irish person broke Africa's future."

Zeth tried not to smile.

He failed by a millimeter.

Ruan saw it and looked pleased with himself.

"There he is."

"Fix only the crash," Zeth said, mimicking Mira's tone.

Ruan put a hand to his chest.

"Respectfully, still rude."

The laugh almost came out of Zeth before he remembered the morning.

The lost ticket.

The vanished branch.

The locked folder.

Mira's hand on the mouse.

Forget what you saw.

The laugh retreated.

He turned back to page forty-four.

The document spoke about Role-Based Access Control in the voice of a principal who could smell untucked shirts through a wall.

Zeth read the definition of a role.

Then the definition of a group.

Then the definition of a permission.

Then the definition of a user, as if the company was not entirely sure people existed until policy had agreed to them.

He tried to focus.

He was good at focus. Focus had been one of the first things the academy beat into him without leaving a mark anyone could complain about. Focus through hunger. Focus through noise. Focus while an instructor shouted two centimeters from your ear and dared your eyes to move.

Academy body.

He could sit still. He could keep his face neutral. He could make the body obey.

But his mind would not stop walking back to the same locked door.

`archive\_legacy\_reader`

`CIVIC-BBX`

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

He had not written the last one down.

That did not make it safer.

It was worse in his head. His notebook at least had paper between it and the world. His head carried things naked.

Mira passed behind him once.

She did not stop.

She did not look at his screen.

She did not need to.

Zeth felt her attention land between his shoulder blades and stay there for four full steps after she had gone.

Ruan rolled his chair closer again.

"You know," he whispered, "in private school, if someone made you read a policy document for discipline, they had to call it character development."

"At the academy they just called it Tuesday."

Ruan glanced over.

The joke had come too fast.

Zeth knew that look already. It was not pity. Ruan did not know him well enough to pity him properly. It was curiosity wrapped in manners.

"Tuesday sounds hectic where you are from," Ruan said.

"You should see Wednesday."

Ruan gave a quiet huff and rolled back to his keyboard.

Zeth kept reading.

By page fifty-nine he had discovered that Apex Sentinel did not believe in mistakes. It believed in incidents, deviations, escalations, process failures, remedial actions, and retrospective alignment.

Mistake was too human.

Mistake had fingerprints.

At eleven thirty-two, an email arrived from Nandi Mthembu reminding all interns that lunch was from twelve to one, unless department requirements differed, and that attendance at the afternoon compliance briefing was compulsory.

Ruan read it and lifted both eyebrows.

"Lunch exists. HR has confirmed."

Zeth did not reply.

He was rereading a paragraph about audit trails.

The system must preserve a non-repudiable record of user activity where technically feasible and operationally mandated.

It was one of those sentences that sounded clean until you noticed the escape hatch.

Where technically feasible.

Operationally mandated.

Two little doors left open in a sentence about closing doors.

"Mnguni."

Sizwe Khumalo's voice came from behind him.

Zeth turned.

Sizwe stood with his old coffee mug in one hand and a lanyard looped around two fingers. He looked the same as he had all morning: tired but not weak, calm but not relaxed. His shirt sleeves were rolled with the precision of a man who had done the same thing for years and had stopped thinking about it.

"Coffee," Sizwe said.

It did not sound like a question.

Zeth looked at the guidelines.

"Mira told me to read."

"I am your supervisor."

"She looked serious about it."

"Mira always looks serious about things. It is one of the pillars holding this building up."

Ruan made a small sound into his fist.

Sizwe looked at him.

"Mr Bekker."

"Sir."

"If the apostrophe defeats you while I am gone, do not let it take the rest of the codebase hostage."

"Understood."

Sizwe looked back at Zeth.

"Coffee."

Zeth locked his computer, closed his notebook into the gap between his keyboard and monitor, and stood.

Mira watched from three desks away.

Sizwe saw her watching.

Neither of them changed expression.

That was how Zeth knew the coffee was not about coffee.

The Apex cafeteria occupied a glass corner of the seventh floor, as if even lunch had to understand branding. Below, Johannesburg pushed into the afternoon in layers of traffic, construction dust, taxi-yellow flashes, and the silver glint of office towers trying to make the city look more certain than it was.

The cafeteria smelled like burnt espresso, hot oil, and expensive furniture.

On one wall, a muted television carried rolling news with subtitles. Parliament footage played behind a headline about the State Records Protection Bill. Men in suits leaned toward microphones. A woman in a red jacket spoke with her hand raised. Below her, the line crawled:

Journalist groups warn bill may endanger whistleblowers

Zeth's eyes caught on the word journalist.

Then on whistleblowers.

Then he looked away before looking away became evidence.

Sizwe took two coffees from the counter, paid with his employee card, and placed one in front of Zeth at a small table near the window.

"Do you take sugar?"

"No."

Sizwe sat.

"Good."

"Because sugar is bad?"

"Because I already paid."

Zeth lifted the cup.

The coffee was strong enough to make a weaker man admit secrets.

Sizwe watched him take the first sip.

"You finished the asset ticket quickly."

Zeth kept the cup near his mouth.

"It was not complicated."

"Most things that break systems are not complicated."

Zeth put the cup down.

Sizwe leaned back.

"Tell me what you saw."

The cafeteria noise softened around them. Cutlery. Shoes. A laugh from a table of analysts. The hiss of milk behind the counter.

Zeth thought of Mira.

Forget what you saw.

"I saw an old log line," he said.

"Which said?"

"Inherited role not found in active profile."

"And?"

"A temporary permission issue."

Sizwe's mouth did not move, but Zeth felt the correction before it came.

"That is an answer for a form."

Zeth said nothing.

"I did not ask for the form answer."

The television moved from Parliament to a studio panel. A caption named one of the guests as a senior executive from Duma Genesis Technologies. Diego Duma was not on screen, but the logo sat in the corner behind the anchor, clean and proud.

Zeth did not look at it.

"If a user has no active role," Sizwe said, "but a folder opens for him anyway, where do you look first?"

Zeth felt the shape of the question settle into him.

This was not a trap.

Or it was a better kind of trap.

"Depends on how the system resolves access."

"Everything depends. Choose."

"I look at direct permissions first. Then group membership. Then inherited roles. Then cached tokens. Then service accounts. Then defaults set during migration. Then failed deny rules. Then anything marked temporary, because temporary is where permanent goes to hide."

Sizwe watched him.

Zeth regretted the last sentence.

It sounded too much like himself.

"And if the folder appears, then disappears?"

"Someone removed access."

"A person?"

"Or a process."

"Which one do you trust?"

"Neither."

For the first time, Sizwe looked almost pleased.

"Good."

Zeth wrapped both hands around the coffee cup. The heat bit his palms and gave his body something clean to understand.

Sizwe said, "Most juniors choose one answer too quickly. Person or process. Malice or bug. You did not."

"Bugs can be malice with a deadline."

Sizwe's eyes sharpened.

It was small. A tightening. A light switching behind old glass.

"Who taught you to say things like that?"

"No one."

"That is rarely true."

"Then I do not remember."

Sizwe looked at him for a long second.

On the television, the panel changed again. Another subtitle crawled by:

Opposition demands transparency on archive-security tenders

Sizwe did not look at the screen.

"Where did you learn systems design?"

Zeth gave the answer that had kept doors open and conversations clean.

"Duma Foundation Academy."

Sizwe's face did not change enough for a stranger to notice.

Zeth noticed.

It was like watching a man step on glass under a carpet.

"The academy," Sizwe said.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"From twelve."

"Scholarship intake?"

"Yes."

"Parents?"

Zeth's hand tightened around the cup.

The coffee moved.

Not much.

Enough.

Sizwe looked at the ripple and then at Zeth's face.

"Sorry," he said.

It was a strange apology because it sounded real.

That made Zeth distrust it more.

"They died," Zeth said.

He used the short version because the long version belonged to police files, news clippings, half-remembered rooms, and adults who used soft voices while taking inventory of what a child had lost.

Sizwe nodded once.

"Your surname is Mnguni."

"It is."

"Menzi?"

Zeth set the cup down too carefully.

"Why?"

Sizwe did not answer immediately.

For a moment, he was not looking at Zeth.

He was looking at something much further away, something that had happened before Apex built glass cafeterias and branded elevators and rules about escalation handling.

"I knew a Menzi Mnguni," Sizwe said.

The cafeteria did not change.

People still queued for food.

Someone complained about the curry.

The television still spoke silently about a bill that would decide what the country was allowed to know.

But Zeth felt the table become smaller.

"A lot of people knew my father after he died," Zeth said.

The edge in his voice arrived before permission.

Sizwe accepted it.

"I knew him before."

Zeth waited.

Sizwe looked down at his coffee.

"Not well enough."

That was not the answer Zeth expected.

He had expected distance. Defensiveness. The familiar arrangement of adult guilt into something useless but polite.

Not well enough sounded like a wound he had not been invited to touch.

"Where?" Zeth asked.

"University, briefly. Later through contract work. He was not the easiest man to forget."

Zeth's throat tightened.

He hated how quickly the body betrayed him with old names.

"People say that when they mean difficult."

"He was difficult."

Zeth looked away.

Sizwe added, "He was also usually right."

That brought Zeth back.

"About what?"

Sizwe's thumb moved along a stain on the side of his mug. Old coffee had darkened a thin crack near the handle.

"Systems."

Zeth almost laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"That is broad."

"He liked broad things. People tried to give him small problems because they thought that would keep him manageable. He would solve the small problem, then show them the bigger one hiding behind it."

Zeth knew that feeling.

Not as memory.

As inheritance.

He looked at the window. His reflection hovered in the glass over the city, faint and dark, wearing the shirt he had chosen too carefully, the old suit trousers he had not yet escaped, the face of a young man pretending he was having normal coffee at work.

"Did you work with him at Duma Genesis?" he asked.

Sizwe's hand stopped on the mug.

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

Then Sizwe corrected himself.

"Not officially."

Zeth heard the door open.

Not a real door.

The other kind.

"What does that mean?"

Sizwe looked past him.

"It means this is a bad place to have a good memory."

Zeth turned.

Elias Venter was approaching with two men in suits and a woman holding a leather folder. He moved through the cafeteria like the room had rehearsed for him. People noticed him without staring. Conversations dipped, then recovered.

Elias had been in the orientation video after Diego. Chief Operations Officer. Apex Sentinel Systems. Smooth voice. Silver hair. Smile with no wasted teeth.

He stopped at their table.

"Sizwe."

Sizwe looked up with the exact face of a man who had never discussed anyone's dead father in his life.

"Elias."

Elias's eyes moved to Zeth.

"One of our new interns?"

"Zeth Mnguni," Sizwe said.

The name hung there.

Zeth watched Elias for the flicker.

There was none.

Or Elias was better than most.

"Ah," Elias said warmly. "Software engineering?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We need sharp young people. Especially now."

He glanced toward the television, where the Parliament panel continued without sound.

"The country is finally waking up to the reality that records are infrastructure. People think secrecy is about hiding things. Often it is about protecting what a modern state cannot afford to lose."

The woman with the leather folder nodded like this sentence had paid her salary.

Sizwe did not look at the television.

"Or protecting who cannot afford to be seen losing it," he said.

Elias smiled.

It was still friendly.

That made it worse.

"That is why we have people like you. To keep the controls honest."

"Controls do what they are told."

"Then we must tell them carefully."

The two men in suits smiled because they understood the shape of executive humor even if they did not understand the content.

Elias turned back to Zeth.

"Learn everything you can from Mr Khumalo. He can be gloomy, but he is rarely careless."

"I will."

"Good man."

Elias tapped the table lightly with two fingers and moved on.

The cafeteria breathed again behind him.

Sizwe watched him go.

Zeth watched Sizwe watching him go.

"You do not like him," Zeth said.

Sizwe took a sip of coffee.

"I do not like printer jams either. That does not make them conspiracies."

"That is not an answer."

"You are an intern. You are not entitled to answers."

"You called me for coffee."

"I called you for coffee because you are reading policy with the face of someone planning revenge."

Zeth looked down at his cup.

"I was reading it."

"No. You were fighting it."

"It was winning."

"Policy always wins the first round."

Zeth almost smiled again.

Sizwe stood.

"Come."

"Where?"

"Somewhere with fewer televisions."

They left the cafeteria by a side exit Zeth had not noticed. The door opened into a service corridor painted a tired cream, with pipes running high along one wall and framed evacuation maps mounted behind scratched plastic. The air changed immediately. Less coffee. Less glass. More old building.

Sizwe walked without checking whether Zeth followed.

At the end of the corridor, he pushed open a stairwell door.

The stairwell was concrete and cooler than the office floors. Sound behaved differently there. Each step echoed once, then died.

Sizwe stopped between the seventh and sixth floors, on the small landing where a narrow window looked out toward another block of the building. From here, Apex had no branding. It was walls, vents, cables, and tinted glass reflecting tinted glass.

"No cameras?" Zeth asked.

Sizwe looked at him.

"There are cameras."

Zeth froze.

Sizwe pointed up.

A small dome camera sat in the corner above the door.

"But that one has had condensation damage since October."

"You know that?"

"I logged the maintenance request."

"And no one fixed it?"

"Facilities says it is procurement. Procurement says it is compliance. Compliance says there is no risk because it only covers a stairwell. This is how privacy is born in corporations. Not from rights. From admin failure."

Zeth looked at the camera.

The little dark dome watched them badly.

"Why are we here?"

"Because I am going to tell you something that will sound simple, and if I tell you at my desk, you will make the mistake of thinking it is normal advice."

Zeth said nothing.

Sizwe rested one shoulder against the wall.

"You are clever."

Zeth looked away.

"That is not a compliment," Sizwe said.

"It usually comes before work."

"Or before trouble."

Zeth looked back.

Sizwe's face had settled into something older than supervisor calm.

"Clever is cheap in this building. Half the people here are clever. Some are brilliant. Some could have built things that made the country better if better paid as well as useful. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"No, you don't. Not yet."

Zeth bristled.

Sizwe saw it and continued anyway.

"You think the danger is being wrong. It is not. Not here. Here, being wrong is usually recoverable if you are useful and humble enough in the meeting

afterward. Being right is more complicated."

The stairwell hummed faintly.

"Being right too early," Sizwe said, "can still get you punished."

Zeth thought of the folder.

He thought of Mira deleting the ticket.

He thought of his own notebook under the monitor.

"Because people do not want to know?"

"Because knowing has timing. Evidence has timing. Power has timing. If you arrive with truth before you understand the room, the room does not become true. It becomes hostile."

Zeth did not like how much sense that made.

"So I should pretend I did not see it."

"No."

"Mira said forget what I saw."

"Mira said what she needed to say where she needed to say it."

"And what are you saying?"

Sizwe looked at the broken camera.

"I am saying do not confuse noticing with understanding."

Zeth folded his arms.

"That sounds like forgetting with better grammar."

Sizwe's mouth twitched.

"Your father had that problem too."

Zeth went still.

The stairwell felt colder.

Sizwe noticed.

He did not apologize this time.

"He could hear a system lie."

"Systems don't lie."

"People always say that."

"Systems execute."

"Exactly." Sizwe pushed off the wall. "A system does exactly what someone gave it permission to do. That does not make it honest. It makes the dishonesty repeatable."

Zeth felt the sentence strike something already waiting in him.

Sizwe continued.

"Clean code can serve dirty people. Remember that. Clean tables. Clean logs. Clean permissions. Clean interfaces. The cleaner the surface, the easier it is for a boardroom to point at it and say there is no dirt."

The words gathered in the stairwell.

Zeth heard them once as advice.

Then again as confession.

"What does BlackBox Civic do?"

Sizwe's eyes changed.

It was tiny, but Zeth saw it.

"Who said those words to you?"

"No one."

"Did you read them?"

Zeth hesitated.

Sizwe stepped closer.

"This matters."

"I saw part of a folder label."

"On the intern environment?"

"Yes."

"Did you open it?"

"No."

"Did you search for it?"

"No."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Ruan knows I saw something, but not the name."

"Keep it that way."

"Why?"

"Because he might be decent."

Zeth frowned.

"That is a reason to tell him."

"No. That is a reason not to make him carry something before he has chosen the weight."

Zeth hated that too.

Mostly because it felt fair.

Sizwe lowered his voice.

"Listen carefully. If you write things down, write questions, not accusations. If you save files, save work you are allowed to have. If you see a role you do not understand, learn the role system before you chase the role. If someone asks you what you know, know less than you think until you know who is asking."

"That is a lot of rules."

"You seem like a boy who collects them."

"I am twenty-one."

"Then you are a man who still needs them."

Zeth looked at the landing door.

Through the small rectangle of safety glass, he could see a slice of the sixth floor corridor. Two employees passed carrying takeout containers. Their voices were muffled into nothing.

"Why are you helping me?"

Sizwe did not answer.

"You know something about my father."

Again, silence.

"Did he work on this?"

"On what?"

"BlackBox Civic."

"I did not say BlackBox Civic."

"I did."

Sizwe's face hardened.

"Do not get clever with me in a stairwell."

Zeth's anger rose so fast it surprised him.

"Then stop talking around me."

The words echoed up the concrete.

For a second, Sizwe looked like he might snap back.

Then the tiredness returned.

"I am trying to keep you alive inside a building you entered yesterday."

Zeth swallowed whatever answer had been coming.

Alive was an ugly word for office advice.

It had no business standing next to coffee and intern tickets and a compliance briefing.

"Is that what happened to him?" Zeth asked.

"No."

Too quick again.

Zeth waited.

Sizwe rubbed a hand over his face.

"Your father was not careless. That is all I will say."

"That tells me nothing."

"It should tell you not to believe people who say he was."

Zeth felt the old newspaper language stir in his chest.

Irregularities.

Collapse.

Investigation.

Mental strain.

Words adults used when they wanted a dead man's reputation to finish dying quietly.

"Who said he was careless?"

Sizwe looked at him with something close to pity and stopped himself.

Good.

Zeth could not have handled pity from him.

"A company does not need to call a man careless," Sizwe said. "It only needs to build a filing system where every document around him points in that direction."

The sentence entered Zeth and did not leave.

Filing system.

Every document around him.

"You said you did not work with him officially."

"I said that."

"What did he build?"

"Questions like that are how doors open."

"Maybe they should."

"Maybe." Sizwe looked at the condensation-damaged camera. "But you do not open a door because it exists. You ask why it was left unlocked for you."

That sounded like Mira.

No.

It sounded like Mira and Sizwe had both learned the same fear in different rooms.

Zeth leaned back against the opposite wall.

The concrete was cold through his shirt.

"Did Mira know him?"

"No."

"Does she know who I am?"

"She knows what is in your file."

"And what is not?"

Sizwe did not answer.

The silence answered enough.

From below, the stairwell door opened and two women came in laughing. They stopped when they saw Sizwe and Zeth. One of them wore a finance lanyard and carried a salad in a plastic container.

"Sorry," she said automatically, though there was nothing to be sorry for.

"No problem," Sizwe said.

They continued down.

The moment broke.

Sizwe waited until their footsteps faded.

"Afternoon briefing starts at two," he said.

"That is it?"

"For now."

Zeth stared at him.

"You brought me here to say be careful and my father was not careless?"

"And to see whether you can listen when listening frustrates you."

"What did you decide?"

"Still testing."

It was almost funny.

Almost.

They walked down one flight instead of going back to the seventh floor. Sizwe used his access card on the sixth-floor door. The reader light turned green after a tired half-second.

The corridor beyond was quieter than the intern floor. More closed offices. Fewer bright posters. A row of framed newspaper clippings lined the wall: product launches, technology awards, smiling executives cutting ribbons beside government officials.

Diego Duma appeared in three of them.

Younger in the first. Sharper in the second. Almost exactly the same in the third, as if age had decided to negotiate with him privately.

Zeth slowed despite himself.

In one photograph Diego stood beside a minister and two engineers in front of a banner:

DIGITAL GOVERNANCE FOR A SECURE FUTURE

The date beneath the frame was 2004.

Zeth scanned the faces before he knew why.

No Menzi.

No father.

Only strangers smiling around the empty space where a question wanted to stand.

"Do not linger in corridors," Sizwe said.

Zeth moved.

They reached a small meeting room with the blinds half drawn. Inside, a projector showed a paused slide deck. Someone had left a laptop connected and a half-eaten muffin on a napkin.

Sizwe stepped in, woke the laptop, and closed the presentation before Zeth could read the title.

"Sit."

"I thought we were done."

"We are done with the part where you ask questions I will not answer."

Zeth sat.

Sizwe opened a blank text editor and typed:

```
`user -> group -> role -> permission -> resource`
```

Then below it:

```
`resource -> permission -> role -> group -> user`
```

He turned the laptop toward Zeth.

"Which one is correct?"

Zeth looked at the two lines.

"Both."

"Explain."

"First one is how an application checks whether someone can access a thing."

"And the second?"

"How you investigate why they got access after the thing is already open."

Sizwe nodded.

"Most people only learn the first direction."

"Because they are building."

"Because they are building what they are told to build."

Zeth looked at the text again.

The second line felt like walking backward through a room after realizing something had been stolen.

"Your father liked the second direction," Sizwe said.

Zeth's chest tightened again.

"How do you know?"

"Because he once spent an entire afternoon explaining to three executives that their access model had been designed by someone who thought blame traveled in only one direction."

"What does that mean?"

"It means they hated him by four o'clock."

Zeth imagined it too easily.

Menzi standing in a room where everyone had already agreed not to understand him. Menzi drawing arrows. Menzi insisting. Menzi being right in a place where rightness had become socially rude.

"What happened?"

Sizwe did not answer.

He typed another line:

`logs are not truth`

Then:

`logs are witnesses`

"Witnesses can lie," Zeth said.

"Yes."

"They can be coached."

"Yes."

"They can disappear."

"Yes."

"So why trust them?"

Sizwe looked at him.

"I did not say trust them. I said listen to them before you listen to the person summarizing them."

Zeth sat with that.

Outside the meeting room, someone wheeled a trolley past. Cups clinked.

Sizwe deleted the text.

"A clean system will tell you a clean story. Your job is not to admire the cleanliness. Your job is to ask what dirt the story was built to avoid."

"That sounds like investigation."

"It is engineering."

"Mira said curiosity turns into evidence."

"Mira is right."

"You are telling me to investigate."

"I am telling you to become hard to mislead."

"Same thing."

"Not yet."

Sizwe closed the laptop.

"You are still in love with puzzles. That is normal at your age. You see a hidden folder and think the world has invited you into a secret. It has not. It may have baited you. It may have exposed you. It may have made a mistake. Until you know which, you move slowly."

"I did move slowly."

"Good. Now move slower."

Zeth wanted to argue.

He wanted to say that if people like Sizwe had moved faster, maybe men like Menzi would not become stories told in stairwells.

He wanted to say that caution looked a lot like cowardice when spoken by people with employee cards and offices and years of surviving the same system.

But then he thought of the locked folder appearing on his screen for just long enough to be seen.

He thought of the fingerprint scanner accepting him too quickly on the first morning.

He thought of his access card flashing something no intern card should have flashed.

Maybe slow was not fear.

Maybe slow was how you refused to step exactly where the floor had been polished for you.

Sizwe stood.

"One more thing."

Zeth looked up.

"Do not ask Mira about your father."

"Why?"

"Because she will tell you to ask HR."

"And HR?"

"Will tell you your file is complete."

"Is it?"

Sizwe's expression said no before his mouth said nothing.

There it was again.

The door.

The almost-open thing.

"What is missing?"

Sizwe went to the meeting room door and checked the corridor through the glass.

"You."

Zeth frowned.

"I am in the file."

"No. Your CV is in the file. Your marks. Your scholarship history. Your tax forms. Your emergency contact. Your ID copy. Your fingerprint template. Your polite little paragraph about wanting to contribute to world-class technology in Africa."

Zeth hated that paragraph.

He had rewritten it twelve times until it sounded like a person he would never choose to sit next to.

Sizwe looked back at him.

"But the file does not know what you notice when no one asks you to notice. It does not know what makes you angry. It does not know whether you will choose a clean career over a dirty truth."

"Do you?"

"No."

"Then why warn me?"

Sizwe opened the door.

"Because someone should have warned him."

The corridor noise rushed in.

They walked back toward the elevators without speaking.

At the lift lobby, a group from legal waited with folders pressed to their chests. Priya Naidoo stood among them, neat and alert, listening to a woman in a navy blazer explain something about non-disclosure agreements. She saw Zeth, gave a small nod, then looked away before friendliness became visible.

The lift arrived.

People packed in.

Zeth and Sizwe stood at the back.

On the small screen above the buttons, company announcements scrolled:

Compliance briefing: Public Sector Data Handling

Reminder: No external storage devices on secure floors

Congratulations to Duma Genesis Technologies on ten years of trusted civic innovation

Trusted civic innovation.

Zeth watched the words slide away.

Sizwe did not look at the screen.

When they reached the fifth floor, the doors opened to the software space.
The familiar sound of keyboards and low voices returned.

Ruan looked up as they approached.

"Coffee report?" he asked.

Zeth sat down.

"Bitter."

"As a beverage or an experience?"

"Yes."

Ruan considered this.

"Management quality coffee, then."

Sizwe moved past them without smiling.

"Mr Bekker."

"Sir."

"Status."

"The apostrophe is no longer able to collapse the export. It is still emotionally unpleasant, but contained."

"Commit it."

"Already doing that."

Sizwe looked at Zeth.

"Guidelines."

Zeth unlocked his screen.

Page fifty-nine waited.

Sizwe lowered his voice enough that only Zeth could hear.

"Start at audit trails."

Then he walked away.

Zeth scrolled.

The section began on page one hundred and three.

He read slowly this time.

He read the definitions.

He read the exceptions.

He read the approved retention periods and the conditions under which logs could be archived, summarized, masked, deleted, or transferred to legacy storage.

Legacy storage.

The phrase sat on the page in plain sight.

Nothing hidden.

Nothing dramatic.

Just a normal phrase in a normal policy document in a normal company full of normal people protecting a normal future.

That was the problem.

Everything looked normal if you had not seen it from the wrong direction.

At two o'clock, the interns filed into a training room for the compliance briefing. Nandi Mthembu stood near the front with a smile that had survived many rooms. The projector showed the Apex logo and the title:

Public Sector Data Handling: Responsibility, Confidentiality, and Trust

The word trust appeared in a font large enough to be ashamed of itself.

Zeth sat beside Ruan.

Lesedi sat two rows ahead with a notebook already open.

Arno van Rensburg leaned back with one ankle over his knee, looking like compliance was a weather condition he expected poorer people to endure.

Priya sat near the legal team, straight-backed and focused.

Tumi Khumalo whispered something to another intern that made them hide a smile.

Nandi began with the usual welcome.

The legal presenter took over.

She spoke about confidentiality, client data, classified material, and the importance of protecting state records during a time of national debate.

Zeth listened.

This time, he did not fight the policy.

He listened for doors.

"Information," the presenter said, "does not become harmless simply because it is digital. A leaked file can endanger people, institutions, and national confidence."

On the screen, a diagram showed a document moving from creation to classification to storage to audit.

Zeth followed the arrows.

User.

Group.

Role.

Permission.

Resource.

Then he walked the arrows backward.

Resource.

Permission.

Role.

Group.

User.

A memory came, not from childhood but from twenty minutes earlier: Sizwe typing on the borrowed laptop, deleting the words before anyone else could see them.

Logs are not truth.

Logs are witnesses.

"Certain public-sector systems," the presenter continued, "include media-risk considerations, particularly where sensitive operational information may be exposed through unauthorized channels."

Zeth's fingers went still around his pen.

Media-risk.

The presenter moved on immediately.

No one else reacted.

Why would they?

It was a phrase inside a slide inside a briefing inside a company that made phrases professionally harmless.

Ruan leaned closer.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

"You have the face again."

"What face?"

"The one where I start wondering if I should move my chair for legal reasons."

Zeth wrote one line in his notebook.

Not `CIVIC-BBX`.

Not `R\_NKOSI.watch`.

Not anything Mira could lift from the page and turn into a noose.

He wrote:

`How does media-risk map to access control?`

Then he underlined `how` once.

Not an accusation.

A question.

At the front of the room, the presenter clicked to the next slide.

Zeth felt Sizwe's attention from the side wall before he saw him.

The supervisor stood near the back door with his arms folded, watching the room the way other people watched code run.

His eyes dropped briefly to Zeth's notebook.

Then lifted.

Not approval.

Not comfort.

Something narrower.

A warning that had found the correct shape.

After the briefing, Nandi released the interns with reminders about forms, department schedules, and not losing temporary access cards. The room loosened into chatter. Chairs scraped. Phones appeared. People checked messages with the relief of survivors returning to civilian life.

Zeth stayed seated for a moment.

He waited until most of the room had moved.

Sizwe approached.

"Better question," he said.

Zeth looked at the notebook.

"It is allowed."

"That is not the same as safe."

"Nothing seems to be."

"Now you are learning."

Zeth closed the notebook.

He could feel the question inside it, small and hot.

"You knew my father," he said.

Sizwe looked toward the door.

"Yes."

"And you knew I was his son before today."

"I suspected."

"Because of my name?"

"Because of your name. Because of your school. Because of how you looked at a permissions issue like it had insulted your family."

Zeth almost smiled.

It hurt too much to finish.

"What was he right about?"

Sizwe took too long.

The last interns left the room.

Only the hum of the projector remained.

"He understood that systems do not only move information," Sizwe said.
"They move responsibility. They decide who gets seen doing what. They decide who can say they did not know."

Zeth stood.

"And that was his problem?"

Sizwe looked at him then.

Really looked.

For the first time all day, he did not sound like a supervisor, or a mentor, or a man arranging danger into manageable pieces.

He sounded like someone who had reached the edge of what he could carry quietly.

"Your father understood systems too well," Sizwe said. "That was his problem."

Zeth froze.

Behind Sizwe, the projector kept shining trust onto an empty wall.

Panel Door Preview: Sizwe's Rule

A rotating selection of 1 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 5.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 01 - Policy Punishment



Policy did not hide the door. It taught him how doors talk.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #SizwesRule #SecureDevelopment #ZethMnguni #PanelDoor

Chapter 6: Lindi's Lead

The attachment was gone.

The email remained, which made it worse.

If the whole message had disappeared, Lindi Dlamini could have called it theft and allowed herself the comfort of anger. Theft had shape. Theft had hands. Theft was a person taking something and leaving absence behind.

This was cleaner.

The complaint thread still sat in the newsroom inbox under a subject line so dull it had almost survived the morning:

Public records pilot - urgent concern

The sender name was still there.

Malusi Phiri

The timestamp was still there.

22:43

The footer was still there too, because nothing official in South Africa could fall apart without leaving a disclaimer behind to pretend order had attended the meeting.

But the body of the email had been reduced to one sentence:

Please see attached.

There was no attachment.

Lindi clicked the paperclip icon again.

Nothing.

She clicked the thread history.

Nothing.

She opened the raw header view, because ordinary people prayed and journalists opened headers.

The newsroom around her kept moving with the half-broken energy of a place that was always one printer jam away from confession. Phones rang. Keyboards rattled. A junior reporter near sports argued with somebody about whether a quote could be off the record after it had already been shouted in public. Rain touched the Braamfontein windows softly, not enough to clean the glass, only enough to make Johannesburg look undecided.

Lindi leaned closer to the screen.

At 22:43 the complaint had arrived with an attachment. She knew that much because she had seen the paperclip on her phone the night before, standing in a Pick n Pay queue with a loaf of bread under one arm and her battery on nine percent. She had almost opened it there. Then the signal had dropped, the cashier had asked whether she wanted a plastic bag, and Lindi had done the responsible thing.

She had told herself she would open it properly at work.

Responsible, she was learning, was where evidence went to die.

At 06:12 the thread still showed a paperclip.

At 06:14 the thread preview changed to:

Please see attached.

At 06:17 her reply to Malusi Phiri bounced.

Lindi checked the bounce again.

Mailbox unavailable.

Not full.

Not delayed.

Unavailable.

"Dlamini."

Jonas Maseko's voice came from behind a pile of old newspapers, legal warnings, and one mug that had become a workplace hazard through loyalty alone.

Lindi did not turn.

"I need mail logs."

"Good morning to you too."

"Morning. I need mail logs."

Maseko came to stand beside her desk.

He had been a proper reporter before budgets taught him caution and management taught him phrases like liability exposure. He still carried the body language of a man who wanted to run toward trouble. His face now belonged to a man responsible for other people's salaries.

"What am I looking at?" he asked.

"A complaint that arrived last night with an attachment."

"Where is the attachment?"

"Exactly."

Maseko bent toward the monitor and read the message.

"Maybe it failed."

"It did not fail. It arrived."

"You saw the file?"

"I saw the paperclip."

"That is not seeing the file."

"It is seeing the system admit a file existed."

"That sentence is not going to impress a lawyer."

"One day I want somebody to believe in me the way editors believe in technical errors."

Maseko did not smile.

That worried her.

When Maseko refused to laugh, he was either tired, frightened, or already calculating how expensive the truth might be.

"Who sent it?" he asked.

"Malusi Phiri. Civil Records Support."

Maseko's mouth tightened around the name of the company.

"Contractor?"

"Looks like it. Maybe public records pilot, maybe archive-room upgrades, maybe some tender nobody wanted us to understand before breakfast."

"You have documents?"

"I had documents."

"No, you had a paperclip."

"The man sent a complaint and now his mailbox is dead."

"People resign."

"At 06:17?"

"People resign badly."

"He also is not answering his phone."

Maseko straightened.

That landed.

"You called him?"

"Three times."

"And?"

"Off. Not voicemail. Off."

"Lindi."

"Don't use the voice."

"There is no story without proof."

"There was proof."

"There is no proof now."

"That is the story."

"No. That is a feeling with a deadline."

The printer across the room made a hard choking sound and stopped. Somebody at business desk said, "Again?" with the sorrow of a person addressing family.

Lindi opened another part of the raw header and scrolled.

Most of it was ugly in the ordinary way. Servers. Transfer paths. Authentication strings. Little signs of digital life moving through places no one on the news desk had ever been paid enough to visit.

Then she saw it.

One line.

Short enough to be deliberate.

X-Route-Policy: civic-media-risk / monitor-only

She copied it into her notebook by hand.

Maseko leaned closer.

"What is that?"

"A crumb."

"A crumb is not a court defence."

"I am not trying to go to court. I am trying to phone a source before he becomes a paragraph in someone else's denial. Or worse, in an obituary."

Maseko looked at her then.

Properly.

"Careful."

"That is what people say when they mean quiet."

"No. Quiet is what lawyers ask for. Careful is what old reporters ask for when young reporters remind them of themselves before medical aid."

Lindi sat back.

On the television bolted high in the newsroom corner, Parliament footage rolled with the sound muted. The lower third mentioned the State Records Protection Bill again. Men in suits moved their mouths under captions about national security, classified archives, responsible disclosure, dangerous leaks.

The same words had been on screen all week.

The country was arguing about who had the right to know things.

Lindi mouthed the sentence without sound.

Everything affected everyone.

In the newsroom, a complaint about records had arrived with proof and woken up without it.

That was not poetry.

That was timing.

"Let me call IT," Lindi said.

"No."

"Jonas."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because if this touches the Bill, or Apex, or any of those public-sector security contractors, the first question will be why you were looking at headers instead of escalating properly."

"Escalating to who?"

"Me."

"I am escalating to you."

"With that face."

"This is my normal face."

"That is why we have problems."

He rubbed his eyes with two fingers.

"Call the source. Quietly. No promises. No accusations. No email trail. And do not put State Records Protection Bill and missing attachment in the same paragraph unless you want a letter from somebody called Pieter who charges by the comma."

"What if the man is called Elias?"

Maseko stopped.

"Why Elias?"

Lindi closed the header window one line too late.

Maseko saw it.

He did not read fast enough to catch the route policy, but he saw the shape of her hiding.

"No reason," she said.

"That is the most expensive phrase in journalism."

"You taught me."

"Badly."

He walked away before affection could weaken his authority.

Lindi waited until he was speaking to the printer like a hostage negotiator, then pulled open the bottom drawer of her desk.

The drawer stuck halfway.

It always stuck halfway.

Lindi lifted it, jerked it once, and reached beneath a packet of stale mints, two old press badges, and a lipstick she had bought during an emotional crisis and never trusted in public.

The folder was labelled:

useful people

Not sources.

Sources were sacred.

Useful people were different. They knew where things moved. Which courier came early. Which clerk lied badly. Which security guard smoked near which gate. Which taxi driver had seen a politician's nephew at the wrong door. Which man at Bree sold phone chargers, gossip, and sometimes the truth if the price included respect.

Lindi had been collecting useful people before she had language for journalism.

At eleven she found a neighbour's missing bicycle because the thief had painted only one tyre.

At twelve she proved Mr Mokoena from number 17 was not selling drugs. He was only cheating with somebody's aunt and carrying on like perfume was contraband.

At fifteen she filmed the unfinished children's park near her school, followed invoices to a councillor's cousin, and put the whole thing on YouTube with background music stolen from her brother's phone.

Almost a hundred thousand subscribers arrived in less than a week.

After that came fake charities, school-feeding invoices, missing library computers, and one police captain who smiled on camera right before discovering that comments sections could also investigate.

The channel had later wandered close to a million followers.

Not famous-famous.

Inconvenient famous.

Good cops watched quietly when a case stalled. Bad cops pretended not to know her. Strangers stared just long enough for her to decide whether she needed to leave.

University had slowed the channel. Assignments, fees, fatigue, and the need for an actual job had trained the algorithm to forget her. Lindi hated that when rent was due. She liked it when she had to sit in cafes near buildings where people did not want YouTube detectives asking questions.

She found the card.

Sipho Ndlovu

Bree.

Chargers.

Drivers.

Never pay. Full story upfront.

Sipho answered on the second ring.

"Dlamini, if you need a charger, prices went up. Eskom has chosen violence."

"I need a person."

"People are more expensive than chargers."

"Malusi Phiri. Civil Records Support. I need to know who can find him without making noise."

Sipho sucked his teeth.

The sound told her more than words.

"Call KB."

"Who is KB?"

"Kabelo Motsepe. He is the guy who knows everything from CBD to the whole south of Johannesburg. Even before you know, he knows."

"Sipho, you owe me for saving your marriage and keeping your wife and kids with you. Do not forget I still have the evidence to change that."

"Awu, man, sistela. Trust me, this guy is solid."

"He is not one of your junkies you send to lie to me so they can get money for cheap drugs?"

"No, no."

"Do you trust him?"

"With as much as trust is worth in the city of gold. Trust belongs to the highest bidder."

"Send the number."

"In lobola negotiations, your wife's uncles do not say a word until ukhiphe ivula mlomo. Consider me the vula mlomo. Noma ungafaka 350, I soften him up for you first."

"Yazi, I bumped into Candy last week. She said you disappeared. She does not see you anymore, and you still owe her morning-after money."

"Lindi."

"Kambe, what is your wife's number again? I have images on my phone. I am sure she would love to see."

"Okay, okay, bengidlala, sistela. I will send it now and call him so he answers, because that boy's Truecaller is ahead of time. I think it is that brother of his, or cousin, or adopted- angazi."

"Sipho."

"Okay, okay. Sending. But he is a better negotiator than me. I still owe him like five million drillion from our last deal."

"Five million drillion?"

"Maybe seven hundred. Numbers are emotional."

The number arrived before the call ended.

Lindi did not dial immediately.

For a moment, she only looked at the new contact. Every new contact in journalism meant one of two things if the day was honest about itself: evidence, or a coffin. She wondered which one Kabelo Motsepe intended to become.

Then she dialed.

No answer.

She dialed again.

No answer.

Two minutes passed.

Enough time for Sipho to warn him. Enough time for KB to decide if a journalist was worth damaging his morning.

On the third try, he answered on the fifth ring.

There was wind in the line, then shouting, then a short burst of music before a door shut and the noise fell away.

"Ngitshelwa ukuthi kunosisi ofuna ukungibulala?"

"Lutho, bhuti wami. Ngabe ngikhuluma noKB?"

Silence.

"Kabelo?"

"Sawubona."

"Sawubona, KB."

"Khuluma, sisi. Time is money, money is time. I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't do crime, but somehow Sipho still sends me problems with press cards. What can I do for you, or you for me? Uma umuhle, maybe we can both help each other. Uma uyinkinga, ngitshele manje."

"I need a favour."

"Yoh. Ama-favour ase out of stock okwamanje. But for a small finder's fee I can even get you three. Like Aladdin's genie, but with better fuel economy."

"Awume, bhuti wami. Nami ngisaphanda. I am still starting out properly, and newspapers pay like they are doing me a spiritual favour. I can organise upetrol omncane, but please give all discounts where possible."

"You are negotiating before telling me what I am surviving."

"I am saying being owed by me can come in handy one day."

"Khuluma, ngilale."

"Do you know anyone connected to Civil Records Support?"

The last bit of wind disappeared from his side.

"Ngazi abantu abaningi, mntaka ma. I even know Jesus. You have not said anything yet. I said khuluma."

"Do you know a gentleman named Malusi Phiri? He works-"

"At archives," KB said. "Ngiyamazi, sisi. Yini, is he also not answering his phone?"

Lindi sat straighter.

"What do you mean also?"

"Not so long ago, somebody claiming to be an investigator asked me about a person I know at Civil Records Support. The investigator did not pay petrol. Already suspicious. Then I recently saw both of them on missing posters."

"Both of them?"

"For a journalist, u-slow kancane. Yebo, I know Malusi. I was hoping you would arrive with more concern."

"Who was the investigator?"

"I do not collect unpaid men's CVs."

"KB."

"Rendani Nkosi."

Lindi's pen stopped moving.

Rendani Nkosi had been in her notes since November. Older. Better sourced. The kind of investigative reporter who could make a minister's spokesperson develop flu over the phone. He had been digging around archive-security tenders and ghost protection contracts long before Lindi found the phrase public records pilot.

She had called his office once. He had not called back.

"When did you see the posters?" she asked.

"Yesterday. Bree side."

"Missing-missing?"

"On paper, sisi. Not WhatsApp gossip. Missing."

The newsroom noise came back around her all at once.

Phones. Printer. Maseko's low voice.

People doing the normal work of the day while two names moved closer to a hole.

"I am not saying stop," KB said. "I am saying be careful you do not get stopped."

"Malusi sent us a complaint last night. The attachment disappeared before morning."

For once, KB did not answer quickly.

"Disappeared how?"

"Clean. Body reduced. Attachment gone. Mailbox unavailable."

"You want me to find him?"

"I want to know whether he is hiding, scared, drunk, dead, or pretending to be one of those because someone told him to."

"Sho. You people say good morning with knives."

"Can your people listen?"

"For petrol, people can listen to thunder."

"I can pay petrol."

"Good. Because if Malusi and Rendani are both near the same hole, I am not sending a driver blind."

"No blind drivers."

"What else?"

Lindi looked down at the copied header.

X-Route-Policy: civic-media-risk / monitor-only

Below it, another fragment she had pulled from the routing ugliness:

Migrated-Legacy-Hold: R_NKOSI

"I need to know whether Apex Sentinel Systems touches this records pilot."

The line went so quiet she thought the call had dropped.

"Say that company again."

"Apex Sentinel Systems."

On KB's side, something metal clinked.

"Why Apex?"

"Their name keeps standing close to places evidence disappears."

"Sisi."

"I know."

"No. You don't know. You are saying the words. You do not know yet."

"Then help me know before Malusi becomes another poster."

KB breathed through his nose.

"My boy started at Apex this week."

Lindi's pen hovered over the paper.

"Your boy?"

"Zeth."

The name hit before she invited it.

Dark suit.

Jacket over arm.

Visitor sticker jokes.

A young man in the Apex lobby looking at arrows as if he expected them to lie.

"Zeth Mnguni?" she said.

KB's voice cooled.

"How do you know his surname?"

"His badge."

"Where did you see his badge?"

"At Apex."

"Define at Apex."

"Lobby."

"Define lobby."

"I was being received."

"People who say being received usually have lies in their shoes."

"He insulted my visitor sticker."

KB made a sound that was half laugh, half warning.

"That is definitely him."

"I need to speak to him."

"No."

"KB-"

"No, sisi. Zeth is not one of your leads. He is not a number from Sipho. He is my person."

That landed cleanly.

Good, Lindi thought.

Not because it helped her.

Because it told her what kind of man was standing between her and the intern from the lobby.

"I am not asking you to hand him over," she said. "I am asking you to warn him. If these phrases are ordinary, he can tell you they are ordinary and I will look elsewhere."

"And if they are not ordinary?"

"Then someone is deleting complaints before journalists receive them, and two men connected to the same records story may already be missing."

KB said nothing.

This silence did not perform.

It checked locks.

"Send me the phrases," he said.

"No."

"Sharp. Say them once."

"Civic-media-risk. Monitor-only. Migrated legacy hold. R_NKOSI."

"R_NKOSI like Rendani?"

"I think so."

"I will call him."

"Give him my number."

"I will call him first. If he wants your number, he will get it."

"Public place," she said.

"Daylight."

"That was my plan."

"I mean real daylight. Not dark corners, not dramatic parking lots, not meet me behind the thing like TV people."

Lindi looked at the empty place in the email where proof had been.

"Tell him the woman from the lobby says it matters."

The call ended.

Lindi sat with the phone in her hand.

Across the newsroom, Maseko looked at her.

She lifted one finger.

One minute.

One lead.

One missing attachment turning the whole day in its mouth.

Zeth ignored KB's first call because he was in a compliance session watching a man in a grey suit explain password hygiene as if sin had begun with lowercase letters.

He ignored the second call because Ruan glanced at the vibrating phone, saw KB's name, and mouthed:

girlfriend?

Zeth turned the screen face down.

Ruan mouthed:

baby mama?

Zeth wrote one word in the corner of his notebook and angled it toward him.

Focus.

Ruan read it, nodded gravely, and wrote under it:

Unrealistic.

The compliance analyst clicked to the next slide.

PASSWORD REUSE IS A HUMAN VULNERABILITY

Ruan underlined human and drew a small grave beside it.

Zeth should not have smiled.

He smiled anyway.

Then his phone vibrated a third time.

This time KB sent a message.

Answer before I tell Gogo you are too corporate for family.

Below it came another message.

Also there is a journalist problem.

Zeth stopped smiling.

Journalist problem.

That was not a phrase with clean edges.

At the break, he stepped into the corridor near the water cooler and called back.

KB answered too quickly.

"Finally, Mr Apex."

"Is Gogo okay?"

"Gogo is watching a soapie and judging a woman for forgiving a man with no job. She is fine."

Zeth closed his eyes for half a second.

"Then why are you calling like there is blood?"

"You have been busy, heh? Too busy to answer. Women are calling me left, right, and centre asking for you."

"What are you on about, KB?"

"Uyamazi uLindi?"

"Lindi who?"

"Lindi the journalist."

"Hayi, bafo, angimazi uLindi. I have to go if Gogo is fine."

"Woah. Wajaha kangaka yini? Is there a stampede at Apex?"

"I am at work."

"Then stand there with respect. Ngisho uLindi mina. Umuntu wakho you did not tell me about. She says you met in the lobby, something about stickers and arrows."

Zeth went still.

A woman from finance passed carrying tea and a muffin. He waited until her footsteps were gone.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh?"

"You mean the one with the crooked visitor sticker."

"I do not know if it was blue, green, or orange. I was not there doing colour theory. All I know is I got a call from someone I do not like getting calls from,

saying someone was going to call me. Fede sharp, le'ngane rings me asking about Malusi."

"Malusi who?"

"Malusi Phiri."

"The archives guy who keeps borrowing money from you?"

"That one."

"Manje mina ngingenaphi?"

"Because uyaspeeda, uyaphapha. I was still explaining."

"Explain faster."

"She did not want to give me the whole thing like elokhu ezenza uJames Bond lah. But she mentioned Apex. I mentioned you. Then she mentioned bumping into you and thinks you can help."

"Help with what?"

"A complaint email disappeared. Attachment gone. Sender missing. Malusi missing-missing, not I owe KB forty rand missing. And there was a phrase."

Zeth looked toward the secure development doors.

Mira was not there.

Sizwe was not there.

That did not make the corridor private.

"What phrase?"

"Civic-media-risk."

The words moved through Zeth's body before he could stop them.

Media-risk.

From the compliance briefing.

From the slide.

From the place where public-sector data handling had sounded too polished to be harmless.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Monitor-only. Migrated legacy hold. R_NKOSI."

Zeth's hand closed around the phone.

Not enough to crack it.

Enough to hurt.

R_NKOSI.

He saw the project tree again.

Grey folder.

Locked icon.

`CIVIC-BBX`

Then a file fragment before the screen corrected itself.

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

"Zeth?"

"Where did she get those?"

"From an email header, she says."

"Do not send them to me."

"I did not."

"Do not WhatsApp them."

"I am handsome, not stupid."

"This is not funny."

"I know. That is why I am putting jokes in front of it before it becomes expensive."

Zeth looked down the corridor again.

The water cooler bubbled once.

Someone inside the training room laughed at something that could not possibly deserve laughter.

"I cannot get involved," Zeth said.

"You do not have to marry the problem. Just look at it."

"That is how people get married to problems."

KB went quiet.

Then, without joke, he said, "She says the source might be in danger."

Zeth hated him for saying it properly.

Quietly.

Like truth.

"Lindi is the woman with the sticker," Zeth said.

"Yebo. The sticker one."

"And she said she is a journalist."

"Haibo, mfethu, I did not ask for a CV. Kanti akuyona yini intombi yakho?"

"Eish, KB."

The lobby came back to him too clearly.

Rude to trust stickers before people.

"I met her," Zeth said.

"She said. You were not a gentleman. I raised you better."

"She said that?"

"Ngiyadlala. She said you had jokes for each other. You sounded worried there. Yini, uyamfuna yini?"

"Eish, shut up. And you did not raise me."

"Ungrateful."

"Where does she want to meet?"

KB's voice changed by half a degree.

"Public place. Braam. Daylight. I told her you are trying to behave."

"I am."

"I know. That is why I trust you with someone who isn't."

"KB."

"One conversation. If it is nothing, it is nothing."

Zeth thought of Sizwe in the stairwell.

Do not confuse noticing with understanding.

He thought of Mira's hand on the mouse.

Forget what you saw.

He thought of the locked folder appearing long enough to know his name was not the only thing Apex knew too quickly.

"Send the address," he said.

"Already sent."

"And KB?"

"Yes?"

"If this is dangerous, stay away from it."

KB laughed once.

"My guy. She found me through Sipho from Bree. We are already sitting in the cheap seats of danger."

He hung up.

Zeth lowered the phone.

Behind him, the training-room door opened. Ruan stepped out with two paper cups of water and a face arranged for gossip.

"That sounded serious."

"It was KB."

"Ah. Baby mama, then."

"I will pour water on you."

"In this economy? Wasteful."

Ruan handed him one cup.

Then his expression shifted.

Not much.

Enough.

"You good?"

"I am fine."

"That is office for no."

"Then I am office fine."

Ruan accepted that with the restraint of a man raised among people who hid family problems behind tennis schedules.

"If you need an alibi," he said, "I was with you discussing password hygiene and the emotional collapse of modern man."

Zeth looked at him.

"Why would I need an alibi?"

Ruan sipped his water.

"Because you have the face again."

Braamfontein in the early afternoon smelled like wet concrete, frying oil, exhaust, and student ambition.

Lindi chose a cafe two streets from the newsroom, close enough that she could return quickly, far enough that Maseko could pretend not to know where she was.

The place had mismatched chairs, a chalkboard menu with three spelling mistakes, and a barista who looked personally offended by milk.

Good.

Perfect furniture made people perform.

She took the table near the window with her back to the wall.

Then she noticed she had done that and laughed at herself once.

Zeth arrived four minutes early.

Of course he did.

He stood just inside the door for half a beat, scanning before pretending he had not scanned. White patterned shirt. Dark trousers. No tie. No jacket. The suit had retreated, but it still lived in the careful way he carried his shoulders.

He saw her.

His face did three things quickly.

Recognition.

Suspicion.

Then the office mask.

Lindi lifted two fingers.

He came over.

"Why are you sitting like the walls are about to testify?" he asked.

"Why are you overdressed for a cafe with three spelling mistakes on the menu?"

"For this tavern? Definitely. This place is top class. You really know how to sweep a boy off his feet."

"You wish."

"You invited me."

"To ask questions."

"Same family."

She looked at the chair opposite her.

"Sit down, please."

It came out sterner than she meant.

Fine.

There was something else under it, something with a pulse, and she did not trust it around a missing man.

Zeth sat.

Not too close.

Not too far.

Careful.

Everything about him was careful except his eyes. His eyes kept arriving before the rest of him had approved the trip.

The barista shouted a name that belonged to nobody in the cafe. Nobody reacted. Johannesburg had prepared them for incorrect announcements.

Lindi opened her notebook.

Zeth looked at it but did not lean forward.

"Before you show me anything," he said, "I need to be clear. I am an intern. I cannot investigate Apex for you. I cannot touch their systems. I cannot download files. I cannot confirm internal information."

"That was a complete denial for a question I have not asked."

"Good. Saves time."

"Do you always begin conversations by disappointing people?"

"Only when KB arranges them."

"Fair. But I could sense you guys are close."

Zeth said nothing.

The silence was not rude.

It was locked.

Lindi understood it before she could resent it. KB had drivers, routes, favours, debts, and the sort of knowledge that could become dangerous if described to the wrong person. Zeth was not going to explain him to a journalist he had met once in a lobby.

She cleared her throat.

"Okay," she said.

Then she turned the notebook toward him.

Not her laptop.

Paper.

Old weapon.

Zeth read the copied lines.

His face did not change until the third one.

That was when she knew.

Not proof.

Recognition.

He looked again at the first line.

X-Route-Policy: civic-media-risk / monitor-only

Then the second.

Migrated-Legacy-Hold: R_NKOSI

His eyes stayed there one fraction too long.

Lindi rested her fingers on the notebook edge.

"Ordinary?"

"No."

The answer came out before he could dress it.

He saw that and sat back.

"I mean, no, not ordinary newsroom language."

"I did not ask about newsroom language."

"You asked ordinary."

"And you answered before deciding which kind of ordinary to hide behind."

He looked at her properly then.

Not friendly.

Not unfriendly.

Interested in the way a locked door is interested in a key.

"Who is R Nkosi?" he asked.

"Rendani Nkosi. Investigative reporter. He has been digging around archive-security tenders for months. He missed a meeting yesterday. His phone is off. KB says Rendani asked about Malusi before the complaint reached us. Now Malusi is gone quiet too."

"Missing?"

"Not confirmed."

"That is not the same as no."

"Exactly."

The cafe noise moved around them. Cups. Rain. A taxi hooting outside with deep spiritual commitment.

"Why were you at Apex?" Zeth asked.

Lindi smiled once.

"Beautiful. You jumped the fence."

"Why were you at Apex?"

"I had a meeting."

"With who?"

"Media Liaison."

"Media Liaison was not on the directory."

"You noticed."

"You photographed the directory."

"You noticed that too."

"You were angled toward Records Intake."

This time the smile left her.

Not because he had caught her.

Because he had kept it.

Yesterday, and the detail was still sitting in him like furniture.

"A source said public-sector records were moving through Apex before the pilot was public," she said. "I wanted to know what doors existed."

"Seeing a door is not permission."

He said it too fast.

Not his sentence.

Someone had handed it to him recently and it still had the warmth of another voice.

Lindi stored that.

"No," she said. "But if a public record needs a private corridor, I want to know why."

Zeth looked toward the window.

A student in a red hoodie ran through the rain with a plastic packet over his head. A woman under an umbrella shouted at a taxi driver who seemed unavailable for emotional growth.

"This can get you sued," Zeth said.

"Most useful work can."

"Or worse."

"That was true before I met you."

"You did not meet me. You were documenting a wall."

"You noticed the wall."

He looked back despite himself.

For one second, danger loosened.

Not gone.

Loose enough for both of them to feel the mistake of enjoying it.

Lindi opened the notebook again.

"I need to know if those phrases sound like normal mail security. Civic-media-risk. Monitor-only. Migrated legacy hold."

"No."

"Do they sound like Apex?"

Silence.

There it was.

The place where he could lie.

He did not lie quickly. That gave her more hope than it should have.

"They sound like systems built by people who do not want non-technical staff asking follow-up questions," he said.

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer I can give."

"You have been there barely two days and already they taught you to talk around a room."

Zeth's face tightened.

For a moment, she thought she had pushed too hard.

Then he said, quietly, "Someone warned me."

She heard the shape under it.

Not policy.

A person.

"Good warning?"

"Not comforting."

"Those are usually the ones you remember."

He studied her.

"You are not scared enough."

Lindi almost laughed.

Wrong sound.

"You think because I am talking, I am not scared?"

He said nothing.

"I am scared all the time," she said. "But if I wait for fear to leave before I move, then fear is in charge. My mother did not raise me to be managed by a feeling."

That reached him.

She saw it.

Not attraction first.

Recognition.

Better.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"One thing."

"People say one thing when they mean a staircase."

"I want to know whether R_NKOSI is being watched by a system connected to Apex or the records pilot. Not your passwords. Not your career. Not some movie hacking scene. One check. If it is nothing, I follow another lead."

"And if it is not nothing?"

"Then I come back."

"That is what I thought."

"But not today," she said. "Today I am asking for one check."

He breathed out through his nose.

Almost a laugh.

"I cannot search internal systems."

"I did not ask you to."

"I cannot confirm internal flags."

"I did not ask you to."

"I cannot be your source."

"You are not that generous."

His eyes came up.

Sharp.

"Then what am I?"

Lindi closed the notebook.

"A person who noticed the arrows were lying before I told him which way they pointed."

The answer sat between them.

Outside, rain thickened.

Inside, the barista finally found the owner of the abandoned coffee and handed it over like justice had been delayed.

Zeth looked at his phone.

Then the door.

Then the notebook.

Work.

Exit.

Question.

She could see him choosing the lie before he spoke.

"I will check one thing," he said.

"Public sources only," he added.

"Of course."

"No Apex systems."

"Of course."

"No files."

"Of course."

"Stop saying of course like customs is checking your bag."

"Sorry."

"You are not sorry."

"No."

This time he smiled properly.

Quick.

Reluctant.

Too young for all the caution around it.

Lindi looked down first.

Not because she wanted to.

Because Malusi Phiri was missing, Rendani Nkosi was missing, and whatever Zeth Mnguni did when he smiled did not get to become the most important thing in the room.

She tore the page from her notebook and folded it once.

Zeth did not take it.

Good.

She placed it on the table between them.

"Memorise."

"That is dramatic."

"It is paper. Relax."

He looked at the lines.

Then away.

"Civic-media-risk," he said.

"Monitor-only."

"Migrated legacy hold."

"R_NKOSI."

He closed his eyes for half a second.

Opened them.

"Got it."

Lindi picked up the paper and dropped it into her coffee.

Ink bled into brown water.

Zeth stared at her.

"That was unnecessary."

"But stylish."

"Wasteful."

"Newsroom coffee. It had already failed."

He shook his head.

"KB was right about you."

"What did he say?"

"Trouble."

"He said worse things before that."

"No," Zeth said. "He says that when he is worried."

Lindi's smile softened before she could stop it.

"He is a good contact."

"He is not a contact."

Fast.

Protective.

There.

Another door.

Lindi nodded.

"He is KB."

Zeth accepted that.

Barely.

But he accepted it.

His phone buzzed on the table.

He looked at the screen.

Whatever he saw closed him again.

"I have to go."

"Apex misses you?"

"Apex counts everything."

"Do they count coffee?"

"They would if they could turn it into a role."

She almost asked what that meant.

Then she remembered the rhythm in one of her old notes.

User.

Group.

Role.

Permission.

Resource.

She did not say it.

Not yet.

She was finally learning not every useful thing needed daylight at once.

Zeth stood.

He left money on the table for coffee he had not ordered.

"You did not drink anything," she said.

He looked around the cafe.

"They could use it."

He did not want to admit that he had felt the need to pay for her drink.

"Be careful," he said. "Maybe I will miss you."

He thought he was being sarcastic.

It came out heavy with meaning.

"You too," she said.

She ignored the joke.

Or whatever it had been.

He looked like he wanted to ask something else.

Maybe about Apex.

Maybe about Records Intake.

Maybe about why a journalist with a dead paperclip had called his best friend before lunch.

Instead he nodded once and stepped back into the rain.

Lindi watched him cross the street without running.

Of course he did not run.

Even in the rain, he made himself walk.

Zeth's phone buzzed before he reached the corner.

KB.

Did you behave?

Zeth looked back once.

Through the wet cafe window, Lindi was still at the table, notebook open, eyes lowered to the page as if staring hard enough could make the missing attachment return.

He typed:

Define behave.

Then:

She is trouble.

KB replied immediately.

Yoh.

Then:

Please don't get fired before you become rich.

Zeth almost typed:

No promises.

Instead he put the phone away.

He returned to Apex with rain on his shoulders and Lindi's phrases arranged behind his eyes like objects on a desk.

Civic-media-risk.

Monitor-only.

Migrated legacy hold.

R_NKOSI.

He did not write them down.

He did not open anything.

He did not search.

He sat through the rest of the afternoon and fixed a small validation bug in a form that did not care about journalists, missing attachments, fathers, or the fact that the word legacy had started following him around like a debt collector.

At five seventeen, Ruan rolled his chair closer.

"You are doing that thing where your silence becomes a meeting invite."

"I am working."

"You have been staring at the same semicolon for twenty seconds."

"It is suspicious."

"All semicolons are suspicious. That is not news."

Zeth saved the file.

"Are you going home?" he asked.

"Eventually," Ruan said. "My mother wants proof that employment did not kill me. I am deciding how dramatic to be."

"Tell her closed shoes were worn."

Ruan pointed at him.

"Exactly. She will weep."

Zeth logged off.

The system accepted the command.

Cleanly.

Systems were always cleanest when they were closing the door behind you.

He drove back to Maboneng through rain that made every traffic light look bruised. Taxis shouldered through lanes with religious confidence. Office workers stood under awnings pretending not to hate one another. A man sold umbrellas from a crate with the speed of someone who understood markets better than economists.

In the apartment, the couch waited where he had left it.

The mattress still leaned against the wall, wrapped in plastic.

Boxes stood around the room in KB's handwriting.

SHIRTS / DOCUMENTS / RANDOM

BOOKS / CABLES / MAYBE FOOD

IMPORTANT THINGS THAT ARE NOT MINE

Zeth put his bag down.

He changed out of the work shirt because it smelled like office rain and restraint.

He made noodles in a pot too small for dignity.

He ate standing at the counter because sitting made the apartment feel more permanent than he was ready to admit.

Then he took out his old laptop.

Not the Apex machine.

His own.

The one with a cracked hinge, a battery that would never last through load shedding, and a keyboard where the A key had gone shiny from years of being used more than money.

He placed it on the small table.

Plugged it in.

Waited while it complained itself awake.

He told himself he was not checking Apex.

That was true.

He told himself he was not investigating.

That depended on who was defining the word.

He searched public records pilot.

Too broad.

He added archive security tender.

News results. Old committee minutes. Procurement notices written in a language designed to make theft sound administrative.

He searched Civil Records Support.

A thin company page loaded slowly. Generic logo. Proud partners. Contact form. No staff list.

He searched Malusi Phiri.

Nothing useful.

He searched Rendani Nkosi.

There he was.

Columns.

Radio interviews.

One photograph of a man with tired eyes and a smile that looked like it had learned not to trust microphones.

No missing-person article.

Not yet.

Zeth searched the phrase exactly:

"civic-media-risk"

No results.

He searched:

"migrated legacy hold"

No results.

The apartment hummed around him.

Fridge.

Rain.

Distant music from another unit.

A lift moving somewhere behind the walls.

One check, he had said.

One phrase, he had meant.

He had checked two.

That was still close enough to honesty if a person was generous and no one was keeping logs.

His cursor blinked in the search bar.

Then he typed:

"R_NKOSI.watch"

No results.

He sat back.

That was the first thing he had searched that Lindi had not given him.

The room felt smaller after that.

Zeth opened a blank text file.

He did not name it evidence.

He did not name it investigation.

He did not name it Lindi.

He named it:

questions.txt

That felt safe enough to be a lie.

He typed four lines.

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

`civic-media-risk`

`monitor-only`

`migrated legacy hold`

Then, below them:

`How does media-risk map to access control?`

The same question from the compliance briefing.

Same question.

Different room.

Homework never ends.

Zeth saved the file.

The laptop fan spun up, loud and tired.

Outside, Johannesburg kept moving through the rain, carrying secrets in taxis, inboxes, access cards, envelopes, and people who told themselves they were only checking one thing.

Zeth closed the laptop halfway.

Not fully.

The screen stayed lit in the narrow dark.

He told himself he could still stop.

The cursor blinked through the gap.

Once.

Twice.

Waiting.

Panel Door Preview: Lindi's Lead

A rotating selection of 3 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 6.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 05 - KB Answers



KB joked until the name Apex took the joke away.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #KabeloMotsepe #LindisLead #ApexSentinelSystems #PanelDoor

Page 08 - Cafe With Spelling Mistakes



The questions came dressed as jokes.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #LindisLead #ZethAndLindi #BraamfonteinCafe #PanelDoor

Page 12 - Questions Dot Txt



One public check became the first private lie.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #LindisLead #QuestionsTxt #ZethMnguni #PanelDoor

Chapter 7: Bad Metadata

Wednesday found Zeth before the alarm.

He opened his eyes at 04:58 and lay still on the couch, listening to the apartment pretend it was not awake with him.

The fridge clicked.

A taxi hooted somewhere below, one short complaint and one longer one.

Rainwater moved in the gutters outside the window with the tired patience of a thing that had not finished with Johannesburg yet.

On the small table, his old laptop sat half open.

Not fully closed.

Not fully awake.

The screen had gone black during the night, but the machine's little power light still blinked at the hinge like it knew something and wanted credit.

Zeth sat up.

The blanket slid from his shoulders.

For a few seconds, he did not touch the laptop.

That felt like discipline.

Then he touched it.

The screen returned slowly, complaining with a pale flash before the desktop settled. The text file waited where he had left it.

questions.txt

Four lines.

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

`civic-media-risk`

`monitor-only`

`migrated legacy hold`

Then the fifth line.

`How does media-risk map to access control?`

Zeth stared at the file until the words lost their edges.

He should delete it.

That would be sensible.

No file, no question. No question, no proof of question. No proof of question, no conversation where someone calm asked why an intern had started collecting restricted-looking phrases on a personal laptop two days after entering a secure company.

He moved the cursor to the top corner.

Hovered over the close button.

Did not click.

Because deletion was not innocence. Deletion was just another record waiting to be found by someone with a better tool and less mercy.

He closed the laptop properly.

The screen went dark.

That was enough honesty for morning.

His phone buzzed on the floor near his shoes.

KB.

Zeth picked it up before the second buzz because KB at dawn was either business, trouble, or Gogo waking up worried about him.

"Gogo?" Zeth said.

"Haibo," KB said. "Listen to this one. I call to greet and already I am an emergency siren."

"It is five."

"Rich people greet at what time?"

"Rich people sleep."

"That's why they stay rich. They are not awake making calls that cost money."

Zeth rubbed a hand over his face.

"Is Gogo okay?"

"She is fine. She woke up to ask why the newsreader always looks like he is lying with his teeth."

"She is probably right."

"Obviously. She also said if you are eating noodles again, she will pray for your stomach separately."

Zeth looked at the pot in the sink from last night.

"Tell her I ate vegetables."

"Which vegetable?"

"Onion."

KB was quiet.

Then he said, "My friend, even criminals deserve better lies."

Zeth almost smiled.

Almost.

KB heard the part that did not arrive.

"You sound finished."

"I am fine."

"That one is your company voice. Leave it at Apex."

Zeth stood and folded the blanket before answering. Not sharply. Not like the academy. Just enough to make the couch look less like a confession.

"What is happening?"

"Lindi called Sipho again."

Zeth stopped.

"Why?"

"Because apparently Malusi's phone is still off, Rendani is still missing, and journalists have a disease where waiting feels like dying."

"Did she ask for me?"

"Awu. You wanted her to?"

"KB."

"Ngiyabuza nje."

"Did she ask for me?"

"No. She asked if I had heard anything from Malusi's side. But she said your name by not saying your name."

"That is not a thing."

"It is very much a thing. Women are professionals at speaking around the person they mean."

Zeth walked to the window and looked down at the street. A delivery bike moved slowly past, the rider hunched against the wet morning.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I am still alive, which means I have not found anything useful yet."

"That is your system?"

"My system has kept me breathing longer than some people's degrees."

Zeth did not answer.

KB lowered his voice.

"Sharp, listen. I know you. You are already doing that thing where your mind runs ahead and then your body pretends it is still in the room."

"I am going to work."

"Exactly. Work. Not prison. Not war. Not whatever beautiful trouble with dimples has brought to your doorstep."

Zeth closed his eyes.

"You have not seen her dimples."

"So there are dimples?"

"I have to shower."

KB laughed properly then.

"Yeyi. Apex is in trouble."

"Goodbye, KB."

"Eat something that grew from the ground and not from a packet."

"Onion grows from the ground."

"Uzoquleka e-boardroom if ukhuluma isingisi on an empty stomach."

Zeth ended the call.

The apartment went quiet again.

On the small table, the laptop stayed closed.

Zeth got ready without opening it.

He showered.

He ironed the white patterned shirt again because it had begun to understand his body and he did not own enough shirts to punish it for that. He put on the dark trousers. No tie. No jacket. Clean shoes. No suit performance.

In the mirror, he looked less like the email and more like the building.

That should have felt like progress.

It felt like surrender with better lighting.

Before leaving, he picked up his phone and opened a new message.

Lindi's number sat in his recent calls with no name saved beside it.

He had not saved it.

That was not caution.

That was avoidance.

He typed:

What exact time did the complaint reach your inbox?

He stared at it.

Deleted your.

Typed it again.

Sent before he could make it worse.

The reply came while he was locking the apartment door.

Good morning to you too, Apex.

He should not have smiled in the passage.

He did anyway.

Then another message arrived.

22:43. Thread list still had the paperclip at 22:44. Why?

Zeth typed:

Do not send screenshots to me.

Her reply came immediately.

You ask like a source and panic like legal. Pick a personality.

He looked at the message long enough that the hallway light switched off around him.

He typed:

Keep it offline.

Then, after a pause:

Please.

For once, she did not answer with a joke.

Okay.

The single word stayed with him all the way down to the basement.

Outside, Wednesday had no interest in being kind.

The rain had thinned into a grey mist that made windscreen wipers feel dramatic. Zeth drove through Maboneng with both hands on the wheel, the Polo humming like it still suspected every road was a test. By the time he reached the Apex basement, his shirt cuffs were damp, his stomach was empty, and the word 22:43 had become a small stone under his tongue.

He parked in Bay V-12.

The tie was still on the passenger seat.

He looked at it.

"Do not start," he said.

The tie said nothing with dignity.

In the lobby, the turnstiles opened for him without argument.

Card.

Green.

Finger.

Green.

The guard nodded before the screen finished updating.

"Morning, Mr Mnguni."

"Morning, bhuti. Unjani namhlanje?"

The guard blinked once. Most people gave him a nod and kept walking.

"Ngiyaphila," he said. "Kodwa bathi ukuzala ukuzelula. Hayi mina sengihlulekile. Umfana wami sevele wayeka isikole."

"Wayeka?"

"Uthi isikole is not for him this week."

Zeth smiled before he could stop himself.

"E-academy besikubiza nge-leadership lokho."

The guard laughed properly.

Near reception, the cleaner from his first day rolled past with a bucket clipped to the trolley. Her name badge said JOYCE, though everything about the way she carried herself asked to be called Ma.

"Mshiye, mfana," she said. "Ukube izingane bezinama-policy document, sonke besizoresigna."

Zeth turned to her properly.

"Sawubona, Ma Joyce."

"Yebo, mtanami." She looked at his shirt, then at the missing tie.

"Namhlanje awugqokile isuit yomngcwabo?"

"Namhlanje ayikho i-tie."

"Kuhle. Manje usubukeka sengathi uyasebenza la, hhayi ukuthi ulande izikweletu."

"Progress," Zeth said.

She rolled away smiling.

For a moment, Apex felt less polished.

Zeth knew more people like the guard and Ma Joyce than he knew businessmen, accountants, and engineers. Guards, cleaners, drivers, kitchen staff, maintenance men. People who knew which doors stuck, which managers shouted, which lift made a sound before it failed, and which visitors looked lost before reception noticed. He knew how to greet them because they were not furniture, and because his life had never allowed him

to pretend they were.

Zeth stepped through, then stopped himself from looking back at the display.

Systems displayed names.

That was their job.

Knowing when to display them was the part he no longer trusted.

Ruan waited near the lifts holding two coffees and looking like money had lost a small fight with sleep.

"You collect allies quickly," he said.

"I greeted people."

"Where I come from, that is called advanced networking."

"Wednesday has come to collect," he said.

"From who?"

"All of us. But personally, I owe it nothing."

He held out one coffee.

Zeth looked at it.

"Why?"

"Because you look like you argued with a spreadsheet in a dream."

"I do not drink coffee."

"You are in software engineering."

"So?"

"Software engineers turn coffee into code. That is industry doctrine."

"Then I will disappoint the doctrine."

"Then hold it. Warmth creates the illusion of being cared for."

Zeth took it.

"You are strange."

"Thank you. My mother says it with less admiration."

The lift opened.

They entered with two accountants, a woman from HR, and a man in a hoodie that said I CAN EXPLAIN IT BUT NOT FOR FREE.

Ruan nodded toward the hoodie.

"There. Engineering formalwear."

Zeth watched the floor numbers rise.

"It has sleeves."

"Black tie."

The HR woman glanced at them, decided she had heard worse, and returned to her phone.

On the fifth floor, the air felt different.

Not visibly.

That was the problem with pressure. It did not always enter the room wearing its own name.

Sizwe stood near the secure development door with his old mug in one hand. Mira was at her desk, already typing. Neither of them looked surprised to see Zeth.

That unsettled him.

Ruan tapped his card at the secure development door.

Green.

"Still loved," he said.

Zeth tapped his.

Green.

Fast.

Inside, his workstation had no active tickets.

The queue was empty.

The guidelines document was open exactly where Mira had left it the previous day.

Page one.

Purpose Of Access Control

Zeth sat down.

He did not touch the mouse.

Ruan leaned over the desk island.

"Did they put you in the naughty corner digitally?"

"I have no ticket."

"Luxury. I have three. One of them is apostrophe-related. At this point I am considering writing to Ireland."

Zeth looked at his blank queue.

The lack of work felt less like punishment than waiting.

At 08:11, Mira appeared beside his desk with a printed sheet and a face that had never believed in easing people into things.

"Mnguni."

Zeth turned.

"Yes."

She placed the sheet in front of him.

"Metadata normalization ticket. Training scope. You will read the ticket twice before opening anything."

Ruan looked over.

"He gets metadata? I get punctuation trauma?"

Mira did not look at him.

"You get what the system believes you can survive."

Ruan placed a hand on his chest.

"That was unnecessarily accurate."

Zeth read the sheet.

SD-18504

Training Sandbox: Media Intake Metadata Sorts Out Of Sequence

Priority: Low.

Assigned to: Mnguni, Zeth.

Environment: Dev / Training.

Description:

When sorting media intake sample records by event time, some items appear out of sequence. Expected behaviour: normalize all timestamps to SAST and sort by event occurrence.

Do not modify source records.

Do not access production mail systems.

Do not alter role filters.

Do not export sample data.

Zeth read it once.

Then again.

The ticket was simple.

Too simple.

Mira stayed beside him until he looked up.

"What is the first instruction?"

"Do not modify source records."

"Second?"

"Do not access production mail systems."

"Third?"

"Do not alter role filters."

"Fourth?"

"Do not export sample data."

"Good."

"Why me?"

"Because you finished yesterday's ticket quickly."

That was not the whole answer.

It was barely dressed enough to enter public.

Zeth nodded anyway.

"I will fix the sort."

"You will reproduce the issue first."

"Yes."

"You will only fix the sort."

"Yes."

"If you see anything outside the ticket, you call me or Sizwe."

Zeth did not answer quickly this time.

Mira noticed.

"Say it."

"If I see anything outside the ticket, I call you or Sizwe."

"Good."

She walked away.

Ruan rolled closer by one chair-length.

"The way she gives instructions makes me want to confess to things I have not done yet."

"Fix your apostrophes."

"I am. Some of them have families."

Zeth opened the dev portal.

Slow login.

Security banner.

Second prompt.

Training dashboard.

He opened SD-18504 and did exactly what the sheet said.

Reproduce first.

The sample application displayed a list of media intake records. Most were ordinary training nonsense.

Committee minutes.

Building access memos.

Tender attachments.

Scanned ID references.

Complaint emails.

Each row had fields.

`record\_id`

`source\_ref`

`event\_type`

`event\_time`

`stored\_time`

`timezone`

`normalized\_time`

`policy\_tag`

The bug appeared immediately when he sorted by event time. Items from the same evening jumped around the list. Some fields were stored with offsets. Some were stored as UTC. Some were plain strings pretending the world had only one clock.

Zeth exhaled.

This was not mystery.

This was laziness with consequences.

He opened the parser.

The code was old enough to have opinions.

Half the timestamps were treated as local time even when they included a timezone offset. The parser converted some values twice and did not convert others at all. A person in Cape Town, Johannesburg, London, and an application server in a cold room could all disagree about the same minute and still pass the test suite because no one had written the test suite to care.

He wrote one failing test.

Then another.

Then stopped before he made the ticket bigger than it was.

Fix only the issue.

He could hear Mira's voice without enjoying the privilege.

Ruan muttered from the other side.

"I have discovered a new kind of evil."

"What?"

"The crash only happens when the exported file is opened in Excel."

"That is not new evil."

"It feels fresh to me."

Zeth ran the failing test.

Fail.

Good.

He fixed the parser.

Run.

Pass.

He reproduced the sort.

Better.

Almost.

One record still sat out of order.

Zeth frowned.

He reran the sort.

Same row.

He checked the field values.

`record\_id: TRN-MI-044`

`source\_ref: R\_NKOSI.watch`

The room did not change.

No music.

No red light.

No dramatic warning.

Ruan clicked his mouse. Someone near the window laughed about a server restart. Mira answered a phone with "Naidoo" and no patience. Sizwe walked past with a file under his arm.

Only Zeth stopped.

He took his hands off the keyboard.

That was what saved him from doing the first stupid thing.

He read the row without touching anything.

`source\_ref: R\_NKOSI.watch`

`event\_type: attachment\_hold`

`event\_time: 2011-01-04T20:41:09Z`

`stored\_time: 2011-01-04T22:41:09+02:00`

`timezone: UTC`

`policy\_tag: civic-media-risk`

Two rows above it:

`source\_ref: R\_NKOSI.watch`

`event\_type: mailbox\_received`

`event\_time: 2011-01-04T22:43:17+02:00`

`stored\_time: 2011-01-04T22:43:17+02:00`

`timezone: SAST`

`policy\_tag: civic-media-risk`

Zeth looked at the times until they became arithmetic.

20:41 UTC was 22:41 in Johannesburg.

The attachment hold had happened at 22:41.

The mailbox received event had happened at 22:43.

The system had held an attachment two minutes before the mailbox received it.

Maybe the source record was bad.

Maybe the sample data was fake.

Maybe someone had imported training rows from a production issue and forgotten to clean the names.

Maybe.

Maybe was the place cowards sent facts to wait.

Zeth leaned back.

Ruan noticed immediately.

"You have the face."

"No."

"That was not a question."

Zeth kept his eyes on the screen.

"What does Excel do to dates?"

Ruan turned fully.

"Emotionally or legally?"

"Technically."

"Bad things. Why?"

"If one event says 22:41 and another says 22:43, but the first event depends on the second, what do you check first?"

Ruan's smile faded into actual thought.

"Timezone."

"Checked."

"Import order."

"The event field is independent from stored time."

"Clock drift."

"Two minutes?"

"You've met computers."

Zeth looked at him.

Ruan lifted both hands.

"Fine. Depends what the events are."

Zeth did not answer.

Ruan looked from Zeth to the monitor.

He did not lean closer.

That was the first useful thing.

"Is this one of those things where I become safer by knowing less?"

"Yes."

"I hate growth."

Zeth almost smiled.

The smile did not arrive.

He raised his hand.

Not high.

Enough.

Sizwe saw it before Mira did.

That was interesting.

He came over with his mug.

"Ticket?"

"Metadata sort."

"And?"

Zeth turned the monitor slightly. Not enough for the whole floor. Enough for Sizwe.

"One row still sorts wrong after normalization."

Sizwe read the row.

His face did not change.

The mug stopped halfway to the desk.

That was the only sign.

"Explain," Sizwe said.

Zeth kept his voice level.

"The parser was converting timezone offsets inconsistently. I fixed that. Most rows now sort correctly. But this source reference has an attachment hold at 22:41 SAST and a mailbox received event at 22:43 SAST."

"Maybe the receive event was delayed."

"Then it would be stored later, not received later."

"Maybe the server clock was wrong."

"Then more rows from the same source should show drift."

"Maybe sample data is dirty."

"It is."

Sizwe looked at him then.

Zeth held his eyes.

"But dirty how matters."

For a second, there was something like sadness in Sizwe's face.

It came and left too quickly for anyone else to accuse it.

Mira arrived beside them.

"Problem?"

Sizwe did not look away from the screen.

"Timestamp normalization issue."

"I assigned him timestamp normalization."

"He found one."

Mira leaned in.

Read.

Zeth watched the moment she reached `R\_NKOSI.watch`.

Nothing changed.

Which meant everything did.

She straightened.

"Bad sample row."

"Should I exclude it from the test set?" Zeth asked.

"Yes."

Sizwe said, "No."

Mira looked at him.

The air between them tightened.

Ruan rolled his chair backward without making a sound.

Smart.

Sizwe took the mouse, clicked the row, and opened the metadata detail.

He did not open a folder.

He did not access anything restricted.

He stayed inside the ticket's sample view.

That mattered.

The detail panel showed a longer list.

`monitor\_created: 2011-01-04T20:38:55Z`

`mailbox\_received: 2011-01-04T22:43:17+02:00`

`attachment\_hold: 2011-01-04T20:41:09Z`

`attachment\_missing\_state: migrated\_legacy\_hold`

`policy\_tag: civic-media-risk`

`action\_mode: monitor-only`

`source\_ref: R\_NKOSI.watch`

Zeth stopped breathing for long enough to notice himself stop.

20:38 UTC.

22:38 SAST.

The monitor was created five minutes before the email arrived.

Three minutes before the attachment hold.

Mira took the mouse from Sizwe.

Not roughly.

Precisely.

She closed the detail panel.

"This row is not required to fix the parser."

Sizwe said, "It is required to understand why the parser failed."

"Training sample quality is my concern."

"Intern training quality is mine."

Mira looked at him fully.

"Not this kind."

The room had not gone quiet, but Zeth had.

He knew enough to keep still.

Sizwe put his mug down beside the keyboard.

"Mnguni," he said, "what is the ticket asking you to fix?"

"Sort order after timestamp normalization."

"Can you fix that without changing source records?"

"Yes."

"Can you write a test that shows events are sorted by normalized occurrence time even when a sample row has inconsistent event dependencies?"

Mira said, "Sizwe."

He continued as if she had not.

"Answer."

Zeth looked at the closed detail panel.

Then at the rows.

"Yes."

"Then do that."

Mira's jaw shifted.

"And mark TRN-MI-044 for review," Sizwe added.

Mira said, "I will mark it."

"Good."

Sizwe picked up his mug.

"Then it is handled."

The word returned from yesterday with different clothes.

Handled.

Zeth wondered how many things at Apex had been handled until only the clean version remained.

Mira looked at him.

"You will not copy that row."

"I know."

"You will not write down that source reference."

"I already know it."

"That was not my instruction."

Zeth felt Ruan watching the side of his face.

He took a breath through his nose.

"I will not write it down."

"You will complete the ticket."

"Yes."

"Then you will take lunch away from this floor."

That was not a suggestion.

Mira walked away.

Sizwe did not.

He looked at the screen, then at Zeth's hands.

"Slowly," he said.

Zeth nodded.

Sizwe left.

Ruan waited twelve full seconds.

Then whispered, "I have decided I do not like Wednesday."

Zeth stared at the sample rows.

"You said it came to collect."

"Yes. From you. Not from my chair."

"Then fix your apostrophe."

"My apostrophe is no longer the most dramatic punctuation on this floor."

Zeth did not laugh.

Ruan did not push.

That was new.

Zeth wrote the test.

Carefully.

No source reference.

No policy tag.

No copied row.

He created a synthetic sample:

`record\_A`

`record\_B`

`record\_C`

Different timezones.

Different stored formats.

Expected order.

Fail.

Fix.

Pass.

He added a note:

Parser now normalizes event_time values to SAST before sorting. Source records are unchanged. One training sample row appears to have inconsistent event dependency metadata and has been marked for review by security.

He read the note twice.

Too much?

Too little?

He removed by security.

Now it said:

Parser now normalizes event_time values to SAST before sorting. Source records are unchanged. One training sample row appears to have inconsistent event dependency metadata and has been marked for review.

Good.

Plain.

Defensible.

Cowardly enough to live.

He submitted the branch.

Green check.

For now.

At 12:06, Sizwe appeared beside his desk.

"Lunch."

Zeth looked up.

"Mira said away from the floor."

"I heard her."

"Then I should go."

"You are."

Ruan looked between them.

"Am I invited to the ominous lunch?"

"No," Sizwe said.

Ruan nodded.

"Honestly, relieved."

Sizwe turned.

Zeth followed.

They did not go to the cafeteria.

They took the side stairs down two levels, crossed a service corridor that smelled like floor polish and warm cables, and stopped near a vending machine that sold chips, chocolate, and something labelled Health Bar with suspicious confidence.

Sizwe bought two packets of chips.

He handed one to Zeth.

Zeth looked at it.

"This is lunch?"

"This is plausible denial."

"For what?"

"For standing here."

Zeth opened the packet.

Salt and vinegar.

Aggressive.

He ate one chip because his stomach had no moral standards left.

Sizwe leaned against the wall beside the vending machine.

For a while, they ate in silence.

Someone pushed a trolley past the far end of the corridor. The wheels complained all the way through the turn.

Sizwe said, "What is wrong with the time?"

Zeth did not pretend not to know.

"The monitor was created before the mailbox received the complaint."

"How long before?"

"Five minutes."

"What does that mean?"

"It could mean bad metadata."

"That is a label. Not the answer."

Zeth looked at him.

Sizwe ate another chip.

"Answer properly."

Zeth lowered his voice.

"It means the system might not have reacted to the email. It might have been waiting for the source reference before the email arrived."

"Might."

"Yes."

"Good word. Keeps people out of court."

"But not out of danger."

Sizwe looked down the corridor.

"No."

The vending machine hummed between them.

Zeth waited.

He had learned something from Lindi without meaning to.

If a person did not want to answer, sometimes silence made a better question than speaking.

Sizwe noticed.

His mouth moved like he almost respected it.

"Your father hated metadata."

Zeth's chest tightened.

There it was again.

Menzi entering a room without asking.

"Why?"

"Because people treated it like decoration. Date created. Date modified. User. Location. Device. Little labels on the side of the real thing."

"It is not decoration."

"He knew that."

Sizwe folded the top of the chip packet once.

"He said bad metadata could put a real person in a cell while the clean document smiled in court."

Zeth looked at him.

The corridor seemed to narrow.

"When did he say that?"

"Before you were old enough for the answer to help you."

"That is not an answer."

"No."

"Do you enjoy doing that?"

"Keeping you alive? Sometimes."

"Talking around my father."

Sizwe did not answer.

That was answer enough to make Zeth angry.

"Everyone talks around him," Zeth said. "Academy people. Foundation people. Old friends who suddenly remember appointments. Now you. You say his name, then lock the door before I can enter."

"Seeing a door is not permission."

"This is not a system."

Sizwe's eyes sharpened.

"Everything is a system when enough people are afraid."

Zeth looked away first.

Not because he agreed.

Because he did.

Sizwe's voice softened, but only by a fraction.

"You are good with patterns."

"So was he?"

"Yes."

"And that got him killed?"

The sentence left before Zeth had decided to say it.

It stood between them, too large for the service corridor.

Sizwe did not flinch.

That was what made Zeth colder.

"I did not say that."

"You did not have to."

"Careful."

"People keep saying that."

"Because you keep needing it."

Zeth crushed the chip packet in his hand.

The sound was small and stupid.

He forced his fingers open.

"What do I do with the timestamp?"

"Nothing."

"Sizwe."

"You complete your ticket. You do not save the row. You do not tell your journalist. You do not make a private copy. You do not become interesting to the wrong person before you understand what interesting costs."

"How do you know about her?"

Sizwe folded the top of the chip packet again.

"You said enough."

"It is already connected to her story."

"Yes."

"Then doing nothing is a choice."

"Correct."

"And it helps them."

Sizwe looked at him for a long moment.

Then he said, "Bad metadata is not always bad because it is false. Sometimes it is bad because it is honest before the lie has finished dressing."

Zeth held still.

That one went in clean.

Not poetic.

Not comforting.

Useful.

"The row is honest?" he asked.

"I did not say that."

"You are exhausting."

"That is also intentional."

For the first time all day, Zeth almost laughed.

Sizwe saw it and looked relieved in a way he hid badly.

Then his face closed again.

"Listen to me. If you chase this from inside Apex, Apex will see you chasing it."

"Then where do I chase it from?"

"I said if."

"You meant when."

"No. I meant if. You still have a choice."

Zeth thought of the laptop in Maboneng. The black screen. The blinking cursor. Lindi's single Okay sitting in his phone like trust he had not earned.

"No," he said.

Sizwe sighed.

"That is what worried me."

"Then tell me what is safe."

"Nothing useful is safe."

"Then tell me what is less stupid."

That seemed to please Sizwe.

Not enough to smile.

Enough.

"Memory," he said.

Zeth frowned.

"What?"

"For now, your head is safer than a file. No notes. No screenshots. No clever names like questions dot txt."

Zeth's body betrayed him.

Small.

But Sizwe saw it.

His eyes changed.

"You already made a file."

Zeth said nothing.

Sizwe closed his eyes for one second.

"Of course you did."

"It is on my personal laptop."

"That is not a church. It can still be entered."

"There is no network access."

"You drive a Polo with a lock. Does that mean no one can steal it?"

Zeth hated how quickly KB's face appeared in his mind.

Sizwe pushed off from the wall.

"Delete nothing at work. Change nothing because you are scared. At home, decide whether a text file is worth becoming evidence against you before you even know the case."

"So I should delete it?"

"I said decide."

"You should try answering questions professionally one day."

"I work in secure development. We avoid dangerous experiments."

Zeth finished the last chip.

It tasted like salt and irritation.

Sizwe took the empty packet from him and dropped both packets into the bin.

"One more thing."

Zeth waited.

"When Mira says a thing is handled, ask yourself by whom."

Then Sizwe walked back toward the stairs.

Zeth stood beside the humming vending machine for a few seconds after him.

By whom.

Not why.

Not how.

By whom.

That was the kind of question that made doors appear where walls had been minding their business.

When Zeth returned to the fifth floor, Ruan was eating a sandwich at his desk and staring at his screen with visible betrayal.

"How was ominous lunch?" he asked.

"Salty."

"Mine has cucumber. We all suffer differently."

Zeth sat down.

His submitted ticket still had a green check.

For the first time that day, he wanted it to stay boring.

It did not.

At 13:22, the ticket refreshed.

Not the whole portal.

Just the sample table.

The row was gone.

Zeth did not move.

He ran the sort again.

Rows shifted.

The parser worked.

The test data now looked clean.

No `R\_NKOSI.watch`.

No `civic-media-risk`.

No `migrated\_legacy\_hold`.

TRN-MI-044 had been replaced by:

`TRN-MI-044\_REDACTED`

`source\_ref: SAMPLE\_MEDIA\_044`

`event\_type: attachment\_review`

`event\_time: 2011-01-04T22:46:00+02:00`

Clean.

Neat.

Useful.

False in the way polished shoes could be false after walking through mud.

Zeth opened the ticket activity log.

That was within the ticket.

Assigned work.

Defensible.

He did not search.

He did not export.

He read.

`13:07 sample row TRN-MI-044 marked for review`

`13:18 sample row TRN-MI-044 replaced`

`13:19 metadata dependency warning resolved`

`Updated by: SVC\_CIVIC\_MAINT`

Sizwe's question sat down beside him.

By whom.

Zeth looked across the floor.

Mira was in a meeting room with two analysts and a man from legal. He could see her through glass, arms folded, not touching a keyboard.

Sizwe was at his desk on the phone.

Ruan was fighting Excel.

No one was looking at Zeth.

That did not mean no one was watching.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He did not take it out immediately.

Phones were not allowed on the desk.

He waited until his hands stopped wanting to move too quickly, then stood.

"Bathroom," he said.

Ruan looked up.

"Thank you for the operational update."

"If anyone asks."

Ruan's expression changed.

Not joke first.

Friend first.

"I will say you were emotionally defeated by hydration."

"Fine."

In the bathroom, Zeth locked himself in the last stall and took out his phone.

Lindi.

Malusi's number pinged near City Deep late last night. Sipho heard Civil Records has a warehouse contact there. Do not ask how.

Then:

Can metadata lie about where someone was?

Zeth leaned back against the stall door.

For a moment, the building seemed to breathe around him.

He typed:

Yes.

Stopped.

Deleted it.

Typed:

Metadata can be wrong.

Deleted that too.

Typed:

Why?

Sent.

Her answer took thirty seconds.

Because if the phone is right, Malusi was near the warehouse after his email vanished. If the phone is wrong, someone wants me looking there.

Zeth closed his eyes.

Evidence.

Or coffin.

He typed:

Do not go there.

Her reply came fast enough to make his jaw tighten.

I asked a technical question, not for permission.

He stared at the words.

Then typed:

Then technically, do not go there.

This time, three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

You found something.

He did not answer.

Zeth.

His name looked different on her screen.

He hated that.

He liked it more.

He typed:

If a system records an action before the event that caused it, what would you call that?

The reply took longer.

A lie.

Then:

Or a warning.

He looked at the bathroom tiles.

Apex used expensive glass upstairs and cheap grout where people were supposed to be alone. The grout had dark lines at the corners. No system cared about being clean everywhere.

He typed:

Not proof.

She answered:

Nothing is proof until someone is brave enough to keep it.

Zeth almost replied.

He did not.

Because he heard the bathroom door open.

Two men entered, talking about rugby and parking bays. They washed their hands, laughed at something, left.

Zeth waited ten seconds after the door closed.

Then he put the phone away.

When he returned to his desk, the activity log was still open.

`Updated by: SVC\_CIVIC\_MAINT`

He closed it.

Not because he wanted to.

Because he was starting to understand the difference between seeing and surviving.

The afternoon stretched.

Ruan fixed the apostrophe crash and left the insult to names for a future revolution.

Zeth completed the metadata ticket.

Mira approved it without comment.

That was worse than if she had warned him.

At 17:03, the floor began loosening into the strange theatre of office departure. Bags zipped. Monitors went dark. People promised to send emails they would not send until morning. Someone near the printer said, "No, leave it, tomorrow's me must also earn a salary."

Ruan stood and stretched.

"Are you leaving at a human time?"

"Yes."

"Convincing."

"You?"

"My mother wants a photo to prove this job has not killed me. I might use the plant near reception."

"She will think you are thriving."

"Exactly. Fraud begins at home."

Zeth logged off.

The system accepted the command.

Clean.

He did not trust clean anymore.

In the basement, the Polo started on the second try, which felt personal after the day he had had.

Traffic toward Maboneng was wet, slow, and committed to emotional harm. A taxi cut across two lanes in front of him with the confidence of a man who had never feared paperwork. A woman selling fruit under a plastic sheet shouted prices at cars that could not stop. The city smelled like rain, petrol, and fried dough from somewhere hidden.

Zeth drove with Lindi's question in his head.

Can metadata lie about where someone was?

Yes.

No.

Wrong question.

People lied.

Metadata helped.

At the apartment, he did not make noodles.

He made bread and peanut butter because variety mattered even when dignity had left the room.

He ate standing at the counter.

Then he looked at the old laptop.

Closed.

Waiting.

He washed the knife.

Wiped the counter.

Moved one box from the middle of the room to the wall.

Moved it back because the wall made it look more permanent.

Finally, he sat.

Opened the laptop.

The machine woke slowly.

questions.txt waited.

For a full minute, Zeth did nothing.

Then he opened the file.

The five lines looked younger than they had that morning.

Naive.

Proud of themselves.

He placed the cursor at the end.

Sizwe's voice returned.

For now, your head is safer than a file.

Zeth selected everything.

His finger hovered over delete.

He thought of Lindi writing in notebooks because paper could drown in coffee.

He thought of Mira replacing the row.

He thought of Sizwe asking by whom.

He thought of Menzi Mnguni hating metadata because bad timestamps could put real people in cells.

Then he deleted the file contents.

Not the file.

The contents.

Empty white page.

The cursor blinked at the top, pretending innocence.

Zeth saved it.

An empty file called questions was still a question.

But it was less eager to testify.

He opened a browser.

No Apex.

No internal anything.

He searched public pages for City Deep Civil Records warehouse.

Nothing useful.

He searched tender notices.

He searched company registrations.

He searched `Civil Records Support City Deep`.

Nothing.

Then he searched the phrase without quotes:

`SVC CIVIC MAINT`

No results.

Of course.

He sat back.

The apartment hummed.

Fridge.

Lift.

Distant music.

The same chorus as last night.

His phone buzzed.

Lindi.

I am not going to City Deep tonight.

Then:

That is not me promising anything about tomorrow.

Zeth looked at the message.

He typed:

Tomorrow is not safer.

She answered:

Neither is ignorance.

He almost threw the phone onto the couch.

Instead he placed it face down on the table.

Calmly.

Like a person in control of himself.

Then he opened the empty text file again.

He did not type the source reference.

He did not type the policy tag.

He did not type the service account.

He typed one sentence.

‘The system knew before the email arrived.’

He read it.

Deleted it.

Closed the file.

This time, he shut the laptop completely.

In the dark screen, he saw his own face looking back.

Tired.

Young.

Not careful enough.

The timestamps did not prove who had deleted the attachment.

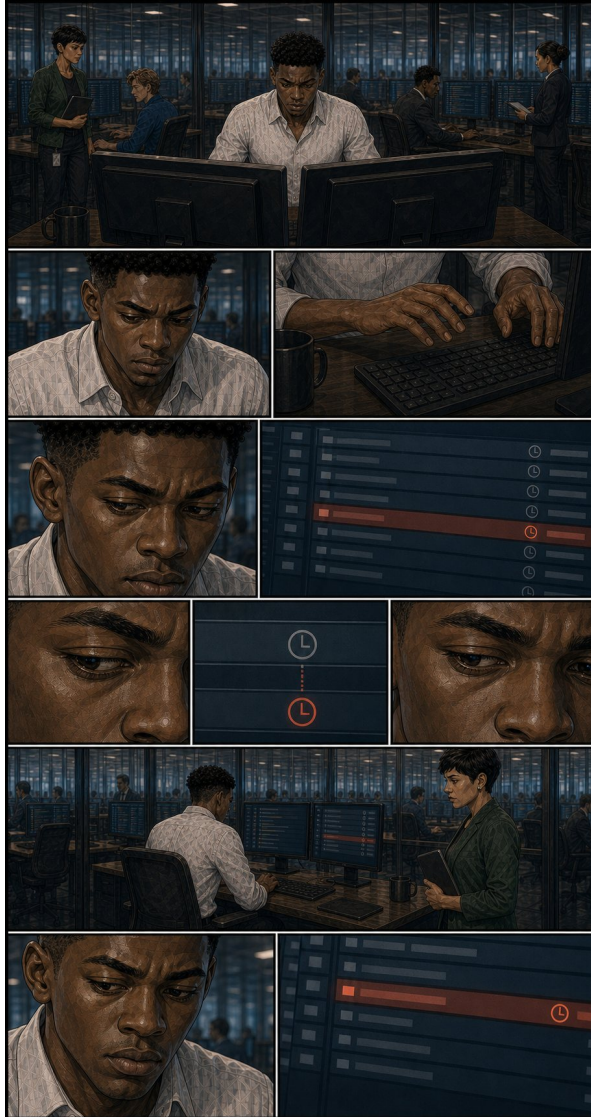
They proved something worse.

Someone had been ready for the evidence before it arrived.

Panel Door Preview: Bad Metadata

A rotating selection of 2 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 7.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 06 - The Row Out Of Order



The row moves wrong, and Zeth stops moving.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #BadMetadata #MetadataNoir #ApexSentinel #PanelDoor

Page 07 - Monitor Before Mailbox



The monitor was waiting before the mailbox knew.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #BadMetadata #SizweMthembu #ApexSentinel #PanelDoor

Chapter 8: The Flash Drive

Thursday began at 04:51.

Zeth woke with the room still dark and the city wet beyond the curtains. Cars moved below in slow lines. Somewhere in the street, a reversing truck beeped three times and stopped.

The old laptop sat closed on the table.

He had emptied questions.txt the night before. Not deleted the file. Emptied it. In the dark, that distinction had felt careful. In the morning it did not.

He reached for his phone.

One message from Lindi.

Sent at 00:17.

Apex, are you alive?

Zeth read it twice.

He did not answer. He was not calm. He simply did not know what the answer would cost.

He showered, ironed the white patterned shirt, and dressed without the tie. The cuff had started to shine where the iron pressed too often. He looked at it for a moment, then buttoned it anyway.

His phone buzzed again while he was making tea.

KB.

Uyaphila?

Zeth typed:

I am going to work.

KB replied:

That is not an answer. That is a place.

Then:

Gogo says eat properly.

Then:

And if the journalist gets you arrested, I was never your friend.

Zeth typed:

She is not getting me arrested.

KB replied immediately.

So there is a she.

Zeth locked the screen and left the tea half finished.

By the time he reached Apex, the rain had stopped. The basement smelled of concrete, petrol, and old water. Zeth parked in Bay V-12, sat for one extra breath, then got out.

In the lobby, the turnstiles opened cleanly.

Card.

Green.

Finger.

Green.

The guard from the previous morning looked up before the system finished with him.

"Sawubona, Mr Mnguni."

"Sawubona, bhuti."

The guard studied him.

"Better today."

"That is generous."

"No. Yesterday was bad."

Ma Joyce rolled past with her trolley and slowed just enough to look at his face.

"Eat today," she said.

"I did."

"Tea is not food."

Zeth almost asked how she knew, then stopped. People who were ignored for a living learned more than systems logged.

"I will," he said.

She nodded and moved on.

On the fifth floor, the air felt sealed. Screens were already awake. Coffee cups stood beside keyboards. Someone near the windows said "compliance" in the tone people used for a problem that would not be leaving soon.

Ruan Bekker waited near their desk island with two takeaway cups.

He held one out.

"Rooibos," he said. "No sermon."

Zeth took it.

"Thank you."

Ruan blinked.

"Now I am worried."

Before Zeth could answer, Mira walked onto the floor with a tablet under one arm.

"Morning," she said.

A few people looked up. Most kept working.

Mira looked across the intern desks first, then the senior developers, then the secure door.

"Quick audit reminder. Keep personal phones off work surfaces, and keep removable media out of secure development unless Asset Control has registered it. That includes USB devices, memory cards, external drives, and charging cables unless they are marked power-only."

Someone near the windows nodded without looking away from his screen.

"If you are unsure, log the query before moving the item. It keeps the audit trail clean and saves everyone from reconstructing intent later."

Her eyes passed over Zeth without stopping.

"Existing tickets continue. New assignments will be released after stand-up."

She walked away.

Ruan waited until Mira was gone.

"That was specific."

Zeth logged in.

The system accepted him.

Clean.

His queue had one ticket.

SD-18522

Training Sandbox: Legacy Media Intake Checklist

Priority: Low.

Assigned to: Mnguni, Zeth.

Description:

Verify checklist steps for damaged removable media received by intake. Do not attach unregistered media to networked machines. Do not attempt production recovery. Do not extract files. Confirm documentation sequence only.

Zeth read it once.

Then again.

Ruan glanced over.

"Bad?"

"Training."

"That was not what I asked."

Before Zeth could answer, Sizwe appeared at the end of the desk island with his old mug in one hand.

He looked at the ticket.

"Do not open it yet."

"I have not."

"Good. Walk."

Ruan looked between them.

"Do I need to know less?"

"Yes," Sizwe said.

Ruan turned back to his monitor.

"Excellent. My speciality."

Zeth stood.

Across the floor, Mira looked up.

Sizwe did not look at her.

That stayed with Zeth all the way to the stairwell.

They went down past the cafeteria level, past the service corridor, and lower still. The building changed as they descended. Glass gave way to painted concrete. The air smelled of dust, warm wiring, and floor polish.

On the third basement level, Sizwe stopped at a grey door and tapped his card.

The reader stayed red.

He waited.

After a slow second, it turned green.

Zeth looked at the reader.

Sizwe said, "Leave it."

The room beyond was small and windowless. Metal shelves lined one wall. A locked cabinet stood against another. On the table were anti-static bags, evidence envelopes, labels, two barcode scanners, and an old computer with no network cable.

There was a camera in the corner.

Zeth could not tell if it worked.

Sizwe put his mug on the table.

"Read the room."

Zeth looked properly.

"Legacy intake. Devices that should not touch the network."

"More."

"Original media gets identified, bagged, logged, and imaged. Recovery happens from an image, not the device. If it is damaged, forcing it can destroy what is left."

Sizwe watched him.

"Good."

He opened the locked cabinet and took out three clear bags.

The first held a cracked memory card.

The second held an external drive with burn marks near the port.

The third held a black flash drive bent near the metal connector.

Zeth kept his hands at his sides.

Sizwe saw that.

"What first?"

"Identify without mounting."

"Why?"

"Mounting can write metadata. Some systems touch a device before a person thinks they have done anything."

"Next?"

"Image it on an isolated machine. Preserve the original."

"If the connector is damaged?"

"Do not straighten it by instinct. Stabilize it or stop."

Sizwe looked down at the flash drive.

"Menzi used to stop people at this point."

Zeth went still.

"When?"

"When they reached before they understood what touching it would change."

"That is not an answer."

"No."

Zeth looked at the bags.

"Is this why you brought me here?"

"Partly."

"To see if I think like him?"

"To see if you touch things before you understand them."

Sizwe picked up the bag with the flash drive.

Black plastic. Scraped side. Bent connector. A red mark near the seam had been scratched until it was almost gone.

"Where did it come from?" Zeth asked.

"E-waste."

"That is the paperwork answer."

"Yes."

"What is the real one?"

Sizwe looked at the camera.

Zeth followed his eyes.

"Assume yes," Sizwe said.

Zeth lowered his voice.

"Then why are we talking?"

"Because we are completing a training checklist."

"Are we?"

"On camera."

Sizwe placed the bag on the table between them.

"It was in a destruction batch logged before the collection happened."

Zeth stared at him.

"Before."

"Yes."

"Like the monitor."

Sizwe's face hardened.

"Do not use that word here."

Zeth looked back at the camera.

The room felt smaller.

Sizwe pushed the bag a few centimetres closer.

Zeth stepped back.

"No."

"Good."

"Do not do that."

"If you had taken it, I would have known I was wrong."

"You are wrong anyway."

"Possibly."

"I am an intern."

"Yes."

"I have been here less than a week."

"Yes."

"I am connected to Lindi, Malusi, Rendani, a row that disappeared, and now you are showing me damaged evidence in a basement room with a camera."

"Yes."

"That is insane."

"It is what is left."

The answer came too quickly. Too plainly.

Zeth heard what was missing from it.

"Who else is left?"

Sizwe did not answer.

"Malusi?"

Nothing.

"Rendani?"

Still nothing.

"You?"

That made Sizwe look at him.

For the first time, the tiredness reached his face before he could hide it.

"Listen to me," Sizwe said. "If a story comes from HR, check the logs before you repeat it."

Zeth's throat tightened.

"A story about who?"

"Whoever they need it to be about."

"About you."

"I said listen."

"I am listening."

"Then keep this in your head. If something looks like company property, ask who called it that. If something looks like rubbish, ask who needed it destroyed. If a record says a thing happened in the correct order, ask who benefits from the order."

Zeth looked at the flash drive.

It was too small for what Sizwe was asking him to do.

"Why not give it to Lindi?"

"Because she will follow the story."

"That is her job."

"Your job is to protect the original before anyone turns it into a story."

"I cannot take evidence out of Apex."

"Then do not."

"Sizwe."

"I am going to put these bags back in the cabinet. You are going to complete the checklist on the training samples. Then you will go upstairs and finish your day. Later, if something that looks like e-waste ends up somewhere it should not, you will decide whether you saw it."

"That is not a plan."

"No. It is a gap."

"For what?"

"For someone outside Apex to see it before it disappears."

Zeth closed his eyes for one second.

When he opened them, Sizwe was watching him with hope.

Zeth hated it.

"Why me?"

Sizwe looked at the damaged flash drive.

"Because Menzi protected originals."

Zeth's jaw tightened.

"Do not compare me to him because you need something."

"I am comparing you to him because it frightens me."

Zeth had no answer for that.

Sizwe continued before Zeth could answer.

"Documents. Drives. Witnesses. People. If everyone else wanted to touch the thing until it agreed with them, your father's first instinct was to keep it away from the room."

The fluorescent light hummed overhead.

Zeth looked at the tape on one shelf. DO NOT REUSE. One corner had peeled loose.

"What is on the drive?"

"I do not know enough."

"But you know enough to risk me."

"Yes."

That was worse than another careful answer.

Sizwe picked up the three bags and returned them to the cabinet.

The lock clicked.

"Complete the checklist."

Zeth stared at him.

"Now?"

"Now."

"You cannot say all that and hand me paperwork."

"The paperwork is why we can leave the room."

So Zeth completed the checklist.

He verified that damaged media should be identified but not mounted.

He verified that original devices should be preserved.

He verified that recovery should happen only on approved isolated machines.

He verified that unregistered devices should not touch the network.

He verified every obvious thing while the important thing sat locked in a cabinet three metres away.

When they returned to the fifth floor, Mira was waiting near the secure door.

"Everything in order?" she asked.

"Training checklist," Sizwe said.

"I asked Mnguni."

Zeth met her eyes.

"Checklist completed. No device mounted. No extraction attempted."

Mira held his gaze for one beat too long.

"Good."

She looked at Sizwe, then walked away.

Ruan rolled his chair closer as Zeth sat down.

"Basement?"

"Training."

"That was not what I asked."

Zeth opened his next ticket.

Ruan watched him for a second, then let it go.

At 12:38, Zeth's phone buzzed in his pocket.

He waited until he was in the stairwell before checking it.

Lindi.

Tomorrow arrived.

Zeth typed:

Tell me you are not at City Deep.

Her reply came after a minute.

I am not inside anything.

That was not the same answer.

He typed:

Lindi.

She sent a photo.

A paper cup on the edge of a plastic table. Beyond it, traffic, industrial fencing, and a stretch of public road.

Public road. Coffee. Witness.

Zeth stared at the image.

Public did not mean safe. Witness did not mean protection. It only meant someone else might see what happened.

He typed:

Leave before dark.

She replied:

I hear you.

No joke.

That worried him more.

The afternoon went quiet in the way offices did when nothing looked wrong.

Zeth completed two harmless tickets: a date picker bug and a validation message with a spelling mistake. Ruan spent forty minutes trying to reproduce an Excel export issue and looked personally betrayed when he succeeded.

At 15:11, Sizwe left the floor.

No announcement.

No explanation.

Zeth felt the absence before he looked up.

Sizwe's desk still held the old mug.

That was wrong.

Mira noticed him noticing.

"Mnguni."

He turned.

"Yes."

"Your ticket still open?"

"Yes."

"Then give it your full attention."

Ruan went still beside him.

Zeth turned back to his screen.

"Yes."

Mira walked away.

Ruan waited until she was out of earshot.

"You okay?"

"Work," Zeth said.

Ruan did.

At 17:02, people began leaving.

Sizwe had not returned.

His mug was still on the desk.

Zeth logged off at 17:11. Leaving exactly on time would look planned. Leaving late would look guilty. Eleven minutes seemed harder to question.

In the lobby, the guard was speaking to Ma Joyce near reception.

When Zeth passed, the guard raised his eyebrows but did not joke.

"Ma Joyce," Zeth said. "Did Sizwe pass here?"

Her face barely changed.

"Which Sizwe?"

The guard looked away.

"Khumalo. Secure development."

Ma Joyce adjusted the cloth on her trolley.

"Many people pass here, mtanami."

Then she reached into the side pocket of her trolley and pulled out a folded yellow disposable glove.

"You dropped this upstairs," she said.

Zeth had not.

He took it.

"Thank you."

Ma Joyce looked at him properly.

"Hamba kahle."

The guard stayed quiet.

Zeth walked to the basement without opening his hand.

Only when he reached Bay V-12 did he unfold the glove.

Inside was a small black flash drive.

No bag.

No label.

Bent connector.

Scratched red mark.

For a moment, Zeth heard nothing.

Then a car door shut somewhere behind him, and everything came back.

Zeth closed his fist around the glove.

He wanted to put it down.

His hand did not open.

He drove home with the flash drive in the glove compartment and both hands tight on the wheel.

At a red light near Maboneng, his phone buzzed.

He did not check it.

At the apartment, he locked the door and stood still until the passage light switched off behind him.

The room was dark.

The old laptop waited on the table.

Zeth put the folded glove beside it.

He did not open it.

First, he turned off his phone completely.

Then he unplugged the router.

Then he removed the cheap Bluetooth speaker from the table and put it in the cupboard.

He stopped there.

He was turning fear into steps.

That did not make the steps wrong.

From the old plastic toolbox under the sink, he took out a memory card, a cheap USB hub, a roll of insulating tape, and a small adapter. The memory card held a recovery image he had built at the academy after too many lab machines failed at the worst possible time.

He booted the laptop from the card.

Plain text filled the screen.

No wallpaper.

No saved login.

No Apex.

He connected the USB hub.

The hub light came on.

For a full minute, Zeth did not touch the flash drive.

He thought of Sizwe's mug on the desk.

He thought of Ma Joyce saying Hamba kahle.

He thought of Mira watching him look at what had been left behind.

Then he opened the glove.

The flash drive lay in his palm.

Small.

Damaged.

Too light.

He straightened nothing.

He forced nothing.

He slid the bent connector into the hub slowly, supporting it with two fingers so the weight would not pull against the metal.

The laptop did nothing.

Zeth watched the terminal.

Nothing.

Then one line appeared.

Device detected.

Another.

Read error.

Another.

Device disconnected.

Zeth kept his hands still.

The hub light flickered.

Device detected.

This time a volume label appeared for less than a second before the drive dropped again.

Zeth did not write it down.

He did not take a photo.

He did not need to.

The label was one word.

RESIGNATION

The drive disconnected again.

The apartment hummed around him.

The flash drive had not opened.

It had shown him one word.

Panel Door Preview: The Flash Drive

A rotating selection of 2 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 8.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

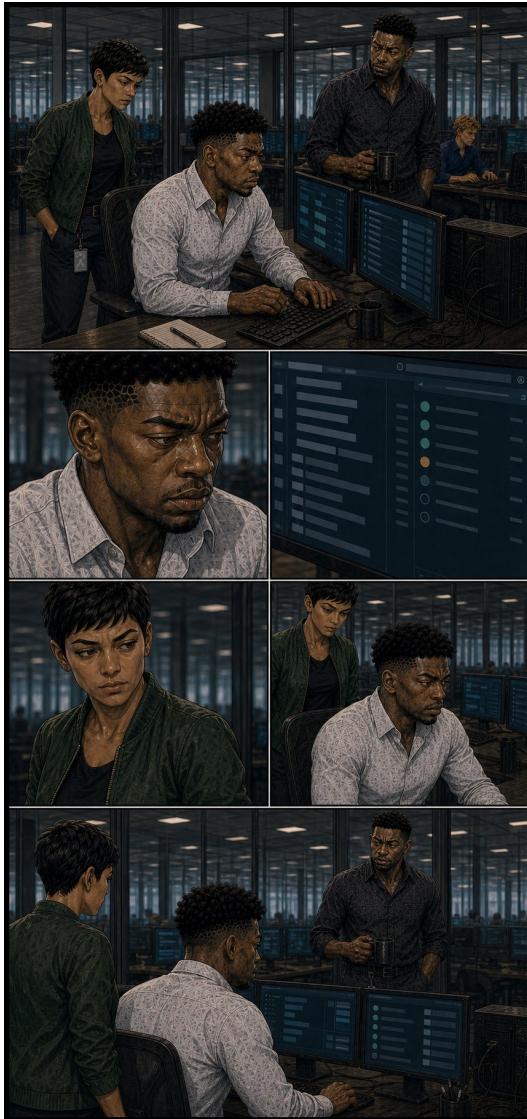
Page 03 - People The System Misses



The lobby saw what the systems filed away.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #TheFlashDrive #MaJoyce #ApexSentinelSystems #PanelDoor

Page 05 - Legacy Media Ticket



The rule arrived in training clothes.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #TheFlashDrive #SizweKhumalo #SecureDevelopment #PanelDoor